

Creating a Meaningful Community-Based Accountability System

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In fall 2017, Texas will join 16 other states in implementing a public school rating system that assigns letter grades to schools and districts. By December 1, 2016, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) must adopt indicators showing how the A-F ratings will be determined, and by January 1, 2017, TEA must submit a report to the Texas House and Senate Education Committees showing the ratings that schools and districts would have been given if the system had been in place for the 2015–16 school year.

As we begin this important rule-making period, and as another Texas Legislature with authority to change the law that established Texas' A-F system prepares to meet, it is imperative that stakeholders know that the research is clear: A-F school rating systems fail as an indicator of school quality, but there is evidence that supports more meaningful kinds of accountability systems.

*This essay is the second in the Texas Accountability Series, a series of essays published by the Texas Association of School Administrators that: provides an overview of A-F systems and their failures; explains why, to be meaningful, school accountability must be community-based and not solely focused on compliance with state testing mandates; and addresses the misfit of state testing programs with school accountability. (See also "[The A-F Accountability Mistake](#)" and "[The Misfit Between Testing and Accountability](#).") Each of these essays was written by John Tanner, executive director of Test Sense and author of *The Pitfalls of Reform*.*

As additional issues related to school accountability arise, the series will be continued to ensure that Texas educators have the information they need to work with policymakers and the public in a meaningful way.

Executive Summary

Argument: Organizations consist of people, processes, and systems, all working together toward a defined benefit, frequently known as a mission or purpose. That benefit is the reason for the organization's existence. Accountability is the means by which an organization determines its success at providing the benefit, or achieving that mission or purpose. A meaningful accountability program requires each participant in an organization to ask the question: For what am I accountable and to whom?

The state of Texas has answered that question for every educator: accountability is to the state for high or rising test scores. This differs from how educators would answer that same question, given their specific assignments and spheres of influence. Their answers would be deeply influenced by local needs and conditions.

True accountability should be designed such that every educator answers the accountability question and then supplies evidence as to his or her effectiveness. It should support the professionalism of teachers, where most of the educational decisions about children are made. It should guide improvement along the way, rather than offer a post-mortem on a year of schooling derived from a single data collection point at the end of that year.

True accountability is shared. It assigns each task to the appropriate stakeholder with the authority to see it through. It is about improvement. It meets each student wherever he or she happens to be and then moves him or her toward a compelling future. True accountability

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relies only upon information relevant to the task at hand rather than simply grasping at whatever data or information is available.

Conclusion: While it is likely that the state will continue to impose broad-brush judgments on schools in some form or another, schools recognize the disconnect between that broad brush and true accountability for the students placed in their care. True accountability for educators' decisions is necessarily local, necessitating the establishment of a meaningful community-based accountability system.

Defining Accountability

Accountability is all about asking and answering the following: For what am I accountable and to whom? Or, if it helps with the grammar, simply reverse it: To whom am I accountable and for what?

CEOs are responsible for generating profits for shareholders. Leaders of nonprofits are accountable to their boards of directors for carrying out their organizations' missions. Elected officials are accountable to represent and serve those who elected them. School leaders are responsible for a high-quality education for every child. Leaders must ask the accountability question with great regularity, and every leadership role must answer it in a variety of ways.

When it comes to public education, the question is particularly complex. Educational responsibility is a layered function, with the state, district, school, and teacher each taking on different roles. A student has needs that are social and emotional as well as academic, with outcomes that differ by grade, subject, and individual circumstances. Parents have a myriad of expectations regarding schooling for their children, and policymakers are accountable for providing the necessary resources and oversight.

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A school is an organization that consists of people, processes, and systems that combine to get things done. All organizations exist to provide a benefit, often expressed as a mission or purpose. That benefit varies greatly depending on the type of organization it is and the relationship one has to the organization (e.g., employee, customer, shareholder, student, policymaker, or parent).

Formal accountability systems should be the means by which an organization checks the degree to which it is providing the intended benefit. A quality organization is one that can regularly be shown to provide the benefit. Part of every formal accountability program should be the requirement that if the benefit is not achieved changes will be encouraged or, in severe cases, required.

For What and to Whom?

For nearly a generation and a half the benefit desired by policymakers for Texas schools (and every other state that has adopted test-based accountability, which is all of them) has been high or rising state test scores in core academic subjects. When high or rising test scores don't appear, the state insists on changes within a school, starting with the processes but eventually moving on to the people. The recent requirement in Texas to translate test scores into school letter grades¹ is just another form of high or rising test scores as the defined benefit of education, as proven by states that have adopted such systems.²

This raises a question that needs to be addressed: Is it appropriate that our primary accountability in education is to the state for high or rising test scores in core academic subjects? The third essay in this series covers state testing methodologies in the context of school accountability, so that won't be repeated here.³ In summary, the answer is an unequivocal no. Tests based on the methodology underlying the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and all other state tests used for school accountability are designed to rank order students for the purpose of comparisons. They were never designed as a tool that could indicate some value as a result of a particular ranking, they cannot judge quality, and when a requirement exists for all students to cross a threshold on such a

test as a measure of success, that requirement equates to asking all students to be above average. That, of course, is absurd.⁴

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Answering the question: “For what and to whom?” represents the manner in which accountability should occur. By necessity, answering that question for an educator always starts with the child. This is not an aphoristic starting point or one meant to soften the impact of accountability. In fact, starting with the child and asking, “For what am I accountable and to whom?” immediately raises the stakes and the consequences rather than lowering them. But it places those stakes squarely at the point where education occurs.

Notice the richness of an education that comes into view should a teacher, a principal, and a superintendent each be given the challenge of answering that question. Answering the question, “For what and to whom?” requires meaningful objectives relevant to the student, the parents, and the community. It focuses educators on processes as well as

outcomes, each of which needs to be defensible within that community setting.

For the teacher, the accountability cannot help but be immensely personal. For elementary teachers in particular, the accountability is frequently to a specific child. For principals it often generates conversations about what can be done with the resources already in the school, and how to maximize that use given the unique needs of the students and the community. For superintendents it frequently goes to leadership, and ensuring that school leaders understand and can execute their roles in driving and supporting a meaningful educational agenda.

Note as well the believability of that accountability when accompanied by evidence designed to answer the question, “Was I successful?” To be believable the selection of evidence needs to be carried out when the accountability is determined, and then checked regularly for the purpose of progress and to inform when a change of direction may be needed. A good accountability

program in this regard is not one that performs a data collection at the end of a year in order to pass a post mortem judgment, but one that guides the process all along. Accountability should be about the degree to which each educator *is providing* the benefits of an education that falls within their sphere of influence.

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An accountability system that waits until after the end of schooling to render its judgment is completely illogical from this perspective. A true accountability system will work hand in hand with an educator as he or she works to deliver against it. It assists in the creation of success in addition to evaluating the degree to which that success occurs.

Overcoming an Unfit Fitness

It is worthwhile to note a prominent quote by former Gov. Jeb Bush, perhaps the country’s leading advocate for accountability tied to school letter grades based predominantly on test scores: “What gets measured gets done.”⁵ If high or rising test scores represent “getting it done,” which they now do, we should question how far that remains from a system that continuously asks, “for what and to whom?” High or rising test scores, however much the majority of Americans want to believe otherwise, represent an impoverished means for “getting it done.”

The philosopher Kenneth Burke refers to such a world that has, for a variety of reasons and often due to complexity, evolved into an illogical or even a bad thing masquerading as just the way things are. He refers to this as an “unfit fitness,” a world we risk striving for, believing it serves our own self-interests or offers a benefit to society, when it does nothing of the sort.⁶

Educational accountability in its current form, intentionally or unintentionally, promotes an unfit fitness. Policy makers have long been enamored of the statistical rigor⁷ in standardized test scores and made the mistake of presuming that such tests could serve their efforts. They placed the judgment of school quality into those instruments, wrongly believing that the elegance of the statistics was sufficient to take on whatever roles were assigned. In the end, the definition of fitness for a school evolved into this: A fit school is one where test scores are high or rising with the judgment determined by the state.

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An unfit fitness compels actions that are frequently counterproductive in the name of being “fit.” An example is the dilemma of teachers torn between spending time on test prep in a school on the verge of sanctions over low test scores, or using that time for rich instruction. One of those is good for students but possibly bad in the short term for the school, while the other is bad for the students but may help the school escape near-term sanctions.

The fact that such a choice even exists is a clear sign of the unfit fitness described above. That the definition of “success” in the current system often goes against the student’s interests is bad enough, but it gets so much worse when the self-interest of a school or the teacher is the other option. A teacher should never

be compelled to do what is wrong for a student in the interest of trying to keep his or her job.

The unfit fitness notion is introduced here as both a warning and a challenge. Creating an unfit fitness is rarely intentional. But once in place, once it is perceived as a healthy (or relatively healthy) norm, changing it requires a mind shift of monumental proportions. Here, another philosopher, the pragmatist Richard Rorty, offers the only solution that has ever worked to do so: We need to learn to speak differently than before.⁸ We need to learn a new conversation, one that runs alongside the old for a while until it overtakes and eventually replaces it, rendering that old, unhealthy conversation obsolete.

“We need to learn to speak differently than before.”

It is the premise of this essay that defining the educational benefit — all or in part—through high or rising test scores creates an unfit fitness, one incapable of achieving the goals of education. It is particularly detrimental to our most vulnerable populations, who are frequently judged as less than their peers, when all they are guilty of is not yet having the same opportunities as those peers. It is time to start a new conversation regarding educational accountability. It is time to start inventing a new system.

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Community-Based Accountability Systems

Texas educators have two choices going forward: One is to let accountability happen to them as a consequence of state action; the other is to create a new accountability paradigm, one based explicitly in the community and the students a school serves. Texas educational leaders have worked hard to opt for the latter.

In *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas*, a consortium of Texas superintendents a decade ago outlined a rethinking of many of the processes and systems within education, as well as what must be done for a variety of stakeholders to realize the goals it lays out.⁹ It adopts — though not in so many words — the notion put forth here that an organization consists of people, processes, and systems that exist to produce an educational benefit, and that accountability must be about the degree to which the benefit was achieved.

In that same vein, Texas educators under the leadership of the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) have since led the charge for creating a Community-Based Accountability System (CBAS), which explicitly attempts to reposition the majority of accountability functions to the communities and students a school serves.¹⁰ This is exactly the right thing to do to generate a new conversation around accountability, one that can eventually eclipse the unfit fitness in the current system and replace it with something better.

The adoption of the accountability question: “For what am I accountable and to whom?” actually necessitates the adoption of a CBAS philosophy. Because the questions and the answers are intensely local in nature, elevating it to the level of accountability cannot be done through a generic compliance requirement imposed by the state.

Those compliance requirements are highly likely to continue, but the recognition that generic compliance and student learning are frequently antithetical to each other, forces a community into what should be a simple decision: compliance or learning? If the answer is learning, then that is where the focus needs to be. Elevating learning to the center of the educational conversation can only be done at the community level. Only through a CBAS can that learning be seen and believed by the community.

As stated earlier, a proper CBAS would add tremendous richness to the educational enterprise rather than water it down. It transfers the most meaningful accountability from the state compliance requirement that is far removed from actual learning, both in the measures selected and in their translation into judgments of quality, to the communities where learning actually occurs. It requires true leadership by superintendents, principals, and teachers to make public their understandings of what each is accountable for and to whom, and to then accept that accountability as their own. It elevates the professionalism of every educator who adopts it, while at the same time creating an intense focus on the specific needs of each and every student.

The CBAS approach represents the most exciting opportunity in twenty years to build a better mousetrap. It is not without its challenges, but we would be wise to vigorously pursue it. The only likely option is to let accountability happen absent the educational community, which would again be a shame.

Considerations for the Development of a Next-Generation Accountability System:

1. The accountability system should be established around student, not system benefits.
2. Accountability systems should separate compliance with the rules from improvement against the benefit.
3. Next-generation accountability should place an intense focus on supporting the professionalism of the teacher.

Building the Next-Generation Accountability System

If the next generation of accountability is to align the needs of students with the goals of accountability it will necessarily need to be based in the communities where public schools serve those students. Following are three recommendations regarding the *system*. These should be taken as conversational starters and not as end states. They have been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny over the years and have changed considerably from their original versions, long since lost in old notes and conversations. They are presented in the spirit of improving

them yet again, in what is their most public presentation yet.

The first recommendation is that **the accountability system be established around student, not system benefits**. As has been stated repeatedly, a school is an organization consisting of people, processes, and systems, tasked with the responsibility of producing a benefit related to the students it serves. But what is that benefit? *What is each educator and each educational institution accountable for and to whom?* What evidence is needed to answer questions regarding the benefit? And most important of all, where is the student in all this?

The second recommendation is this: **Accountability systems should separate compliance with the rules from improvement against the benefit**. Compliance in this sense represents the *minimum* requirements for existing as a school. Schools are necessarily bureaucratic institutions and as such owe allegiance to the requirements that enable their existence. However, accountability of yesteryear (and today) was *only* about compliance: the bureaucratic requirement for high or rising test scores. Compliance of a variety of sorts will still need to exist going forward, but it will be important to separate the compliance components from the improvement components. As was stated earlier, generic compliance and actual improvement are almost always antithetical to each other in the context of student learning.

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The third recommendation is this: **Next-generation accountability should place an intense focus on supporting the professionalism of the teacher**. This is critical for several reasons: First, teachers are the key to the future success of public education. Second, if teaching and learning remains a compliance activity to meet state requirements, it is highly unlikely to support large numbers of a very diverse student population achieving at very high levels. Third, teachers at present are faced with a level of diversity and the need to differentiate instruction that goes far

beyond anything seen in our nation’s past. And fourth, teaching is a profession and deserves to be treated as such.

Consider the community-based nature of each of these. Each is accomplishable but only at the local level, and yet the results would be far richer and more comprehensive than what the state could ever require. It moves the state requirements into the category of compliance, which in turn signals that if improvement is the goal the answers must come from elsewhere. And it decentralizes the process, calling on teachers as professionals to act as the most critical component of the entire system.

The effort in creating a next-generation accountability should always be a principled one. It should not simply accept what exists and modify it ever so slightly, or rename something and pretend the new name signals a new thing. Nor should it adopt measures uncritically, or presume that all the weight should be placed on English and math teachers yet again, no matter that literacy and numeracy are profoundly important.

A report presented to the Oklahoma Department of Education offers three principles that would be hard to argue against.¹¹ Still Texas is a unique state and these too should be considered as conversational starters and not the final word on the topic:

Shared accountability should be a basic rule. This refers to the assignment of educational tasks to the appropriate stakeholder with the authority to see the task through, along with public accountability for each role. A program that distributes accountability in this regard is recognizing that multiple parts of the organization must perform their role effectively.

Adaptive improvement should be the basis for all improvement efforts. Adaptive improvement is the idea that

Guiding Principles for a Next-Generation Accountability System:

- **Shared accountability** should be a basic rule.
 - **Adaptive improvement** should be the basis for all improvement efforts.
 - **Informational significance** should ground every decision regarding data and information.
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part of accountability is about meeting the student where they are and moving them to a future point with the benefit of an education as the goal. This requires two things not a part of the current system: a defined benefit and a starting point aligned with each student's needs. Adaptive improvement insists that we do the same at the school level. Schools do not come as one-size-fits-all with similar students or a similar capacity to advance student learning, but instead are as varied and diverse as the students they serve. Adaptive improvement at the school level requires us to recognize this fact and be prepared in a far-reaching way to offer support.

Informational significance should ground every decision regarding data and information. This principle will likely feel the most different in practice of the three. Educators and stakeholders need actionable information pertinent to their sphere of influence and assigned accountability. Information can be for reasons of compliance or improvement. It can target the public or policymakers, or it can provide parents with meaningful insights into their child's school. Teachers need to be able to regularly hold a mirror up to their practice to gauge where their own improvement is needed. Principals and superintendents need to be held accountable for ensuring these sorts of things take place, and the proper resources are available. The commissioner of education needs information that allows him or her to understand their effectiveness in carrying out that very important role.

Conclusion

Meaningful accountability should be a basic function of any organization that intends to provide a benefit to those it serves. Accountability should indicate the degree to which the benefit occurred, and then promote changes within the organization whenever necessary. Accountability should guide the people, the processes, and the systems that make up an organization, and do so with as much nuance as is necessary to enable good decisions. Accountability should be an active part of the process, not merely a post-mortem surprise.

A proper school accountability program will require every educator to consider the question: for what am I accountable and to whom. A Community-Based Accountability System represents the clearest path forward for doing just that, for the simple reason that the most critical points of accountability are to students, their parents, and then their communities, in that order. The more local the accountability, the more likely it is to have the desired effect, and the richer the educational experience can be for all our children.

Notes

¹ Texas House of Representatives (2015). HB 2804. Retrieved from <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/tlodocs/84R/billtext/pdf/HB02804F.pdf#navpanes=0>. For a good summary of the A-F provision, see <http://www.tasanet.org/Page/707>.

² See Tanner, J., (2016). The A-F Accountability Mistake. The Texas Accountability Series. Austin, TX: Texas Association of School Administrators.

³ See Tanner, J., (2016). The Misfit Between Testing and Accountability. The Texas Accountability Series. Austin, TX: Texas Association of School Administrators.

⁴ Many want to argue this point, stating that the test content is derived from the lists of content in state standards, or that the tests are *criterion referenced*, or that they are not normed as are commercially available test instruments, and thus they are different. A few minutes on the STAAR websites at TEA quickly disproves these arguments. The underlying methodology for STAAR and every state test used for accountability is one designed to rank order students against the differences in their test performance, the names or the common understandings notwithstanding.

⁵ Cited in Howe, K.R. & Murray, K. (2015). Why School Report Cards Merit a Failing Grade. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/why-school-report-cards-fail>. Howe and Murray pulled the quote from the Utah school grading website which has since been discontinued.

⁶ Burke, K., (1954). *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

⁷ Tanner, J., *The Pitfalls of Reform: Its Incompatibly with Actual Improvement*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. In *Pitfalls* I point out that rigor is an odd choice for a term to apply to any aspect of education. The actual definition has to do with an unyielding harshness, as in “the rigors of winter,” or as a qualification of good science as an indicator of precision, which is the meaning here. Only in education has the term moved away from its actual meaning to indicate something akin to “higher,” or “better,” and use in that sense is prolific. I argue in that we would be best to select different terms that say what we actually mean. A “more rigorous” accountability program than what we already have in place, in the actual sense of the term, is the last thing anyone needs.

⁸ Rorty, R., (1989). *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Texas Association of School Administrators, (2008). *Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas: A Work in Progress for Conversation and Further Development*. Austin, TX: Texas Association of School Administrators.

¹⁰ Texas Association of School Administrators. *Community Based Accountability System: A process-Based Framework for Community-Based Accountability*. Austin, TX: Texas Association of School Administrators.

¹¹ Adams, C.M., Forsyth, P.B., Ford, T.G., Ware, J.K., Barnes, L.B., Khojasteh, J., Mwavita, M., Olsen, J.J., & Lepine, J.A. (2015). *Next Generation School Accountability*. A Report Commissioned by the Oklahoma State Department of Education. Oklahoma Center for Education Policy (The University of Oklahoma) and The Center for Educational Research and Evaluation (Oklahoma State University).