

CHAPTER 1

What Is Holistic Accountability?

The Central Purpose of Accountability

The central purpose of accountability is the improvement of student achievement. However obvious this statement may seem, it excludes a number of other purposes with which accountability in the field of education is frequently associated. If the central purpose of educational accountability is the improvement of student achievement, then the purpose cannot be grading, ranking, labeling, sorting, humiliating, embarrassing, or otherwise conducting a political sideshow for the partisans who prefer that their rhetoric remains undiluted with evidence. Both sides in the acrimonious debate surrounding educational accountability have had the opportunity to substitute political zeal for facts. Those who oppose public education have found some accountability systems quite useful in validating their attacks. Some purported defenders of public education, however, do little to advance their cause by attacking accountability, testing, and standards, as if the absence of accountability would safeguard the institution. The resolution of this controversy is neither the use of accountability as a destructive force to shake up public education, nor is it the protection of school leaders and educators from uncomfortable truths. Rather, this book proposes an accountability system that is constructive, comprehensive, and useful: holistic accountability.

Holistic accountability includes not only effects but causes. It includes not only variables within the school but many factors that significantly influence student achievement. It includes not only scores from students but measurements of how teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and parents influence the education of children. It includes not only quantitative data but also the rich description that qualitative information provides.

The Structure of Accountability Systems: Fragmentary or Holistic?

The structure of an accountability system is inextricably linked to its purpose. There are two fundamental choices in the structure of accountability systems: fragmentary and holistic. Fragmentary systems are those that focus exclusively on a very limited set of variables, typically state test scores. In the rare instances in which variables beyond test scores are included in fragmentary accountability systems, these variables include factors such as the ethnicity, economic status, or location of the students. These fragmentary accountability systems send the unfortunate message to stakeholders that accountability is little more than the sum of test scores, and the other variables that are related to educational achievement are those that are beyond our control. After all, because one cannot change economic status or skin color, it is convenient to conclude that, however unfortunate the results may be, the children are doing just about as well as can be expected, and thus no additional effort by the adults in the system will make much of a difference. Although few state policymakers are ever so blunt in their expressions of low expectations of schoolchildren, the inescapable conclusion of most accountability systems is as follows: Tests are the only way to evaluate student achievement, students come to school with high or low ability, and there really is not much that we can do about it. As long as we publish the results, this slovenly reasoning goes, we have done our job with respect to educational accountability.

There is a better way. The fundamental argument of this book is that fragmentary accountability systems offer little more than an educational autopsy, a brief and inconsequential set of numbers that, at best, explain why the patient died. These results, however, shed little light on how to make the patient better. Few readers would regard a single number reported by a physician as a sufficient set of data to guide their physical improvement. Few policymakers would submit to brain surgery after a single number was placed in their medical report. They rarely hesitate, however, to make significant financial and political decisions based on fragmentary information when the subject of those decisions are schools, teachers, and children.

Under ordinary circumstances, we require thoroughly detailed information before making important decisions about our health or about our money. Even in the context of business, decision makers never focus exclusively on the “bottom line” but need information about the source, causes, and related variables that might influence the bottom line. The most influential practice in strategic management of business organizations in the past 10 years has been the development of the “balanced scorecard” (Kaplan & Norton, 1996, 2000) in which business leaders consider a variety of indicators beyond the

bottom line to guide their decisions. Only in the field of education do we routinely accept a single number as a substitute for a complex set of variables.

Holistic accountability is a superior model for policymakers, educational leaders, and the general public. Just as the balanced scorecard provides superior information for business leaders, holistic accountability provides comprehensive information that can lead to better decisions by teachers, school leaders, and policymakers. Ultimately, the teaching and leadership decisions based on holistic accountability lead to improved student achievement and better allocation of resources.

The Elements of Holistic Accountability

A holistic accountability system includes information on student achievement. This book is not a polemic against testing or the use of achievement data. Rather, test data should be used in context. The appropriate context for test scores is not the facile association of test data with ethnicity and poverty. Test data must instead be associated with its antecedents: professional teaching practices, educational standards, curriculum, sorting strategies, leadership techniques, and resource allocation.

Student Achievement Data

States vary widely in the use of student achievement data. Some states rely exclusively on a multiple-choice test to represent what students know and are able to do. Other states make use of multiple-method assessments including multiple-choice, short answer, and essay responses from students. A very few districts and states use comprehensive student achievement information, such as a body of evidence. In these rare circumstances, a student is never evaluated based on a single indicator or score. Rather, decision makers have information collected over several years, including student performance assessments, test scores, demonstrations, experiments, and observations by a variety of independent evaluators. In such circumstances, student achievement is represented by a variety of data from several sources. Whether the ultimate decision is to grant a student credit and a diploma, or to deny a student credit and a diploma, the states and districts with abundant assessment data are on much firmer ground. Moreover, these states and districts recognize what every teacher and student understands: There is more than one way to “show what you know.”

Standards and Curriculum

In addition to a variety of student achievement data, a holistic accountability system will also include information about the standards and curriculum of the schools. Although standards have been inextricably linked to the existence of testing, it is important to note that the foundation of the standards movement stands in stark contrast to the excessive and inappropriate use of the typical standardized test. The essence of educational standards is the comparison of a student performance to a standard rather than to other students. Thus the use of a norm-referenced standardized test to determine whether or not a student has met a standard is contradictory and absurd. Students can be above average and appear adequate in the context of the norm-referenced test and nevertheless fail to meet a standard. Moreover, a student can meet a standard and yet fall below the average of other students. The essence of a standards-based approach to education is the existence of an immutable target toward which teachers and students can aim their efforts. The target in a standards-based system is not “who beat whom” but, rather, what was achieved by each student.

Although it is true that the public has an interest in knowing the extent to which students have met standards, it is manifestly untrue that the best way to assess student success on standards is the use of a norm-referenced test. Rather, a body of evidence that includes a variety of assignments, assessments, performances, demonstrations, and other indications of student ability best assess student success in the achievement of standards.

Policymakers must know more than information about student performance. They must also understand the extent to which students have the opportunity to achieve a standard. This requires an inquiry into the standards themselves, the relationship between standards and assessments, and the relationship between standards and student curriculum. The modern high school offers an illustration of how the mere existence of standards and standards-based curriculum does not establish the opportunity for students to learn. Because we have a history of student choice in high school curricula, states have created the following bizarre situation: Standards require the achievement of certain levels of mastery in written expression and mathematics, along with requirements in science and social studies. State curriculum documents have been created that appear to match the state standards. In the most ideal circumstances, the state tests also match the curriculum and the standards. But the entire house of cards comes falling down if students have the opportunity to choose a less rigorous curriculum than that which is linked to the state standards and testing regime.

The American College Testing Program (Noble, 1999) found that the actual curriculum taken by students is far more influential in determining stu-

dent success than demographic variables. This startling finding flies in the face of the common presumption that the primary variables affecting student performance are ethnicity and economics. In fact, school leaders and policymakers must take personal responsibility for the results that students achieve if the policies of schools allow students to be denied the opportunity to achieve standards. Ironically, this may involve reducing a student's opportunity to make inappropriate curriculum decisions. It is, nevertheless, absurd to elevate choice as a value when the inappropriate exercise of choice may lead to the denial of a high school diploma and a lifetime of restricted opportunities for that same student. In our most prestigious private schools, students follow a rigorous curriculum that is largely prescribed. The opportunity to meet standards is directly linked to the curriculum and assessments of the schools. Failure, in other words, is less of an option when one cannot make choices associated with failure. How does curriculum choice relate to accountability? A holistic accountability system must identify not only the existence of a curriculum linked to standards but must also identify the extent to which students have the opportunity, indeed the obligation, to pursue that curriculum.

Teaching Strategies and Professional Practice

In addition to a consideration of student achievement, standards, and curriculum, a holistic accountability system must also consider teaching strategies and professional practices. Although it is a commonly held notion that teaching is an art rather than a science, a number of specific practices can be described, identified, and measured that are associated with superior student performance. It is equally true that the practice of medicine includes an element of art, but few patients would be satisfied with the notion that objective science plays less than a dominant role in the evaluation of the quality of a physician. So it is with education. Although we can honor the impact of the ineffable qualities of love, encouragement, and care for students, this acknowledgment of some undefined qualities does not diminish the importance of objectively identifiable professional practices that are associated with superior student performance.

We know, for example, that when students write more frequently, their ability to think, reason, analyze, communicate, and perform on tests will improve. Thus it is reasonable for policymakers to measure of the frequency with which students are required to write in class. Moreover, we can distinguish between student writing that is aimless and unfocused, such as the self-absorbed scatological reflections of teenagers in their journals, and the coherent and practiced expression that results when students are able to support an

idea with details or persuade an audience with evidence. Other teaching strategies, such as the effective use of preassessment, continuous use of questions, and frequent changes in classroom practice based on a continuous stream of information from students, are all measurable and objective elements of effective professional practice.

Accountability for Leaders and Policymakers

A holistic accountability system will also include the impact of leadership and policy. The Achilles heel of most accountability systems is the exclusive focus on students and teachers as the objects of accountability. In fact, leaders and policymakers must bear equal scrutiny in an effective accountability system. For example, the common practice in which teaching resources are allocated based on seniority leads to the systematic misallocation of teacher quality away from schools with high populations of poor students to those schools with higher populations of economically advantaged students. When students of color and poverty are significantly less likely to have subject-matter-certified teachers than students who are economically advantaged (Archer, 1999; Haycock, 1998; Ingersoll, 1999), then this is a leadership and policy issue. Leaders and policymakers would never be allowed to allocate financial resources in the arbitrary and discriminatory manner in which they routinely allocate teaching resources. An effective accountability system calls leaders and policymakers to account for the pernicious decisions that they make and the discriminatory policies that they tolerate, no matter how time-honored those practices may be. More important, stakeholders in educational systems will be able to determine whether the causes of low student achievement lie with students and their families, or with the leadership and policy decisions that systematically give poor schools teachers with less experience, lower levels of certification, and fewer qualifications than are possessed by teachers assigned to wealthier schools. Without a consideration of these issues of teacher quality, it is easy to make misleading correlations between the income of students and their academic achievement.

Information and Evidence in a Holistic Accountability System

An effective accountability system requires evidence. Researchers create a false dichotomy when we break the world into quantitative and qualitative evidence, as if the existence of one precluded the utility of the other. In fact, a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence is necessary for effec-

tive and holistic accountability. Measurement is important and it can provide valuable insights about proficiency, progress, and student success. Moreover, measurement lends an air of objectivity to the accountability process. The public is accustomed to measurement in everything from sporting contests to the business pages of the newspaper. It is interesting to note, however, that both the sports and business pages of the newspaper routinely include qualitative as well as quantitative information. In other words, we rarely report a box score without the story behind the numbers. We rarely see an earnings report in business without some elaboration of the antecedents of the profits or losses reported by the company. In most public and private endeavors, the general public understands the need for a balance of quantitative and qualitative information.

In the context of education, quantitative information includes test scores, percentages of students on free and reduced lunch, and objectively measurable elements of teaching strategies, leadership, and policy decisions in relation to standards, curriculum, and assessment. Qualitative information can provide a lens through which we better understand the numbers. By describing the context in which quantitative information is measured and reported, a holistic accountability report allows leaders and policymakers to understand when there is a genuine difference between two schools, and when there is merely a “distinction without a difference.” Policy analysis depends on the identification of meaningful differences in effects and accurate identification of causes, and a combination of different types of evidence is the best mechanism to achieve such accurate and constructive analysis.

We begin with the premise that the purpose of accountability is the improvement of student achievement. If we accept this as the foundation for effective accountability, then we have no alternative except to pursue a course that will take us beyond the superficiality of test scores and reporting of variables that are most easily measured. If our objective is the understanding and improvement of student achievement, then we must identify the antecedents of excellence, including teaching and professional practices, leadership and policy decisions, standards and curriculum, and a host of other variables. The holistic accountability system described in this book creates a vision for how we can move beyond the rating, ranking, sorting, and evaluation that characterize the accountability debate today. By making accountability a constructive force for the improvement of education rather than a destructive force, we can elevate the discussion of educational reform ideas, illuminate these discussions with evidence, and reject the fact-free debate that so frequently characterizes discussions of educational policy.