

# Educators' Notebook

Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

## Accountability In Education: Four Models.

Kenneth Leithwood and Lorna Earl

Many educational reform efforts in Canada over the past dozen years have set out to hold schools more accountable. This article summarizes four different approaches to accountability – *market competition*, *decentralization*, *professionalization*, and *management* approaches. Each approach, it is suggested, makes different assumptions about the amount of change required of schools, the nature of the change, and how to bring it about.

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# Educational Accountability

Kenneth Leithwood and Lorna Earl

## Introduction

Many educational reform initiatives over the past dozen years have aimed to hold schools more accountable. Generally, greater accountability is assumed to have two consequences: (a) better alignment between public aspirations and the purposes schools strive to achieve and (b) improved performance on the part of schools, typically defined by traditional achievement criteria. Rothman (1995) defines *educational accountability* as "the process[es] by which school districts and states attempt to ensure that schools and school systems meet their goals" (p. 189). A focus on goals indicates that the intention of accountability processes is to influence schools and districts towards the accomplishment of their goals, and that their success in doing that is the most important criterion on which to judge their value.

This article examines four different approaches to accountability - *market competition*, *decentralization*, *professionalization*, and *management* approaches. Each approach responds somewhat differently to the meaning of accountability. In addition, each approach makes different assumptions about the amount of change required of schools, the nature of the change, and how best to enact it.<sup>1</sup>

## Market Competition Approaches

This approach to accountability, increasing the competition for students faced by schools, is especially prominent right now. For example, versions of it are evident in New Zealand, Australia, several European countries, the United States, parts of Asia, as well as in Canada. Specific tools for increasing competition among schools for student-clients includes allowing school choice by opening boundaries within and across school systems; school privatization plans; and the creation of charter schools, magnet schools, academies, and other specialized educational facilities. Competition is also increased by altering the basis for school funding so that money follows students (e.g., vouchers, tuition tax credits) and by publicly ranking schools based on aggregated student achievement scores. These tools are often used in combination.

The common ideological thread binding together those advocating for these different tools for increasing competition "is a deep disillusionment with the unresponsive and bureaucratic public school monopoly" (Lee, 1993, p. 133). The goal of this approach to accountability is to transform schools from "domestic" to

"wild organizations" (Carlson, 1965): from organizations that do not have to 'forage for their fodder', receiving almost all of their funding through average daily attendance of students, to organizations that must struggle and compete for resources to survive.

## Decentralization of Decision Making Approaches

When decentralization of decision making is used for purposes of increased accountability, one of its central aims often is to increase voice of those who are not heard (or at least not sufficiently listened to) in the context of typical school governance structures. When this is the goal, a community-control form of site-based management (e.g. Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990) typically is the instrument used for its achievement. The basic assumption giving rise to this form of site-based management is that the curriculum of the school ought to directly reflect the values and preferences of parents and the local community. (Wohlstetter & Odden, 1992). School councils in which parent/community constituents have a majority of the membership are the primary vehicle through which this is attempted. In this model the responsibility for providing an account is shared between school professionals and representatives of the parents and the wider community. It also is the parents and the wider community constituency to whom the primary account is owed.

Decentralization of decision making, however, is sometimes rooted in a broader reform strategy for public institutions generally, which Peters (1992) referred to as "new managerialism." According to Peters, new managerialism "emphasizes decentralization, deregulation and delegation" (p. 269). In countries such as New Zealand and Australia, where school reform has been substantially influenced by the philosophy of new managerialism, creating more efficient and cost effective school administrative structures is a second central goal of decentralization. Typically, this goal is pursued through the implementation of an administrative-controlled form of site-based management that increases school-site administrators' accountability to the central district or board office for the efficient expenditure of resources. These efficiencies are to be realized by giving local school administrators authority over such key decision areas as budget, physical plant, personnel, and curriculum. Advocates of this form of site-based management reason that such authority, in combination with the incentive to make best use of resources, ought to

get more of the resources of the school into the direct service of students. Site councils are typically established to advise the principal, with membership at the discretion of the principal.

The school administrator is clearly the accountable party with administrative-control approaches to site-based management, the account being owed to the central administration of the school board or division.

### **Professional Approaches**

There are two radically different accountability strategies that have a professional orientation. One of these approaches manifests itself most obviously in the implementation of *professional-control models* of site-based management. The other approach encompasses *the standards movement* as it applies to the practices of teachers and administrators. What both strategies hold in common is a belief in the central contribution of professional practice in schools to their outcomes.

Professional-control site-based management increases the power of teachers in school decision making while also holding teachers more directly accountable for the school's effects on students. The goal of this form of site-based management is to make better use of teachers' knowledge in such key decision areas as budget, curriculum, and, occasionally, personnel. Basic to this form of site-based management is the assumption that professionals closest to the student have the most relevant knowledge for making such decisions (Hess, 1991).

Traditional approaches to accountability in the professions emphasize heavy control of entry to the profession by government, with responsibility for subsequent monitoring of accountability turned over to members of the profession itself. Such an approach requires clear standards of professional knowledge, skill, and performance, something the professional standards movement in education set out to define, beginning in the United States, for example, in the early 1980s.

By themselves, standards hold the individual professional accountable to his or her client for delivering services that meet or exceed what is specified by the standards. As part of a licensure system, the professional is held accountable to the government and, beyond the license, one's professional association of colleagues. Standards require professionals to justify failure to practice in ways consistent with the standards. In the context of licensure and post entry professional associations, failure to comply with standards carries the potential of being barred from

entry to the profession, being censured, being limited in one's professional activities, and being removed from the profession.

### **Management Approaches**

Not to be confused with "new managerialism," this approach includes systematic efforts to create more goal-oriented, efficient, and effective schools by introducing more rational administrative procedures. The main assumption underlying this approach is that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with current school structures. Nevertheless, their effectiveness and efficiency are improved to the extent that they become more strategic in choices of goals and more "planful" and data-driven about the means used to accomplish those goals.

This approach encompasses a variety of procedures for "strategic planning," especially at the district level, as well as multiple procedures for school improvement planning, school development planning, and monitoring progress.

When this approach is used, typically it is the organization as a whole that is held accountable, but with more responsibility for such accountability on the shoulders of the senior administrator (e.g. the principal of the school). It is the school and its senior administrator that are most directly accountable to the next level in the organizational hierarchy such as the central office to whom the principal reports.

### **Conclusion**

Much of what passes for accountability-orientated school reform is driven more by ideology or philosophy than evidence. In this respect it is no different than the long list of failed reforms of the past. The basic premise of this article is that we need to think more clearly about, and articulate more explicitly, the assumptions that underlie competing notions of what accountability means for improving schools if these reforms are to improve students' educational experiences.

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1 A fuller discussion of these models and the whole notion of accountability can be found in Leithwood, K. and Earl, L., (2000). Educational Accountability Effects: An International Perspective. In The Peabody Journal of Education, 75(4), 1-18. This is a special issue of the journal consisting of international papers on the topic of educational accountability.

This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture the subtleties and qualifications reflected in the larger works, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.



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<sup>1</sup> A fuller discussion of these models and the whole notion of accountability can be found in Leithwood, K. and Earle, L. (2000), "Educational Accountability Effects: An International Perspective", Peabody Journal of Education, 75(4), 1-18. This is a special issue of the journal of international papers on the topic of educational accountability.