

Linking Evaluation and School Success

Building School Success through Accountability

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Synopsis: The public mood demands stringent quality review to ensure that tax dollars invested in public education have the greatest possible impact on student learning. Most current methods to evaluate system performance do not do a good job of demonstrating how well students achieve intended goals or the impact of program spending. However, assessment is only the first step. How do we enable schools to respond to those results? Attention must be paid to developing successful strategies to focus the system on results and build school capacity for continuous improvement.

Measuring school and system performance presents a major challenge for governments. Ontario's most recent Royal Commission on Learning sharply reflected this reality in its report:

“One complaint we heard repeatedly was that the public education system no longer seems responsible to the public.. There exists widespread unease that schools have become kingdoms unto themselves, with little need to report to parents or the world at large what they are doing with our kids and whether or not they are doing it successfully.”

Canada is not alone. *Education Week's* comprehensive 1997 report card on the condition of public education in the United States noted a troubling lack of useful hard data on performance: “Public education is a vast enterprise.... Its success is clearly linked to the welfare of the nation and the future of our children. Yet we do not know in any but the crudest way, how well our education system is performing.”

Across North America, government audits have begun insisting that we measure the value for tax dollars invested in education. Although this reflects a sound reading of the public mood, it requires a new culture of evaluation in our school systems. Much of the education establishment still harbors an intense distrust of achievement data. (Schmoker, 1996). Many educators and school district officials argue that learning cannot be measured accurately, that testing restricts educational experiences and penalizes the disadvantaged.

This resistance in the field to evaluation of outcomes may be illustrated through the reaction to the report released in 1997 by the B.C. Office of the Comptroller-General. The report found the education ministry and the school system “need to improve measurement and the reporting of how well, students achieve intended goals.” A countering brief to the government submitted by the B.C. Teachers' Federation insisted that accountability must only be measured in terms of “opportunity to learn”, not in measurement of learning outcomes. The BCTF reinforced this position by requests to eliminate the school accreditation process and the province-wide learning assessment program used to track school and program performance over time.

Yet school assessment holds promise of succeeding where other reforms have failed in raising student performance. As Schmoker notes, “ Goals rightly defined and pursued, are the most crucial element in any school system that hopes to get better results.” (Schmoker, 1997) Although the classroom has proved remarkably well-insulated from most government education policies, using student scores on

prescribed tests to make judgments about the quality of education provided in a particular school or district *has* evoked changes in what happens in the classroom. (Murnane, Levy, 1996)

Governments are now seeking the best tools and measures to improve learning outcomes. As they develop frameworks to provide useful data for guiding educational decisions and program investments, they are asking:

- *What are our priorities and targets for future learning gains?*
- *How can we cause schools to focus on goal-setting for improved learning?*
- *What is the evidence that a program significantly improves student learning?*
- *How can funds be reallocated to support what works?*

Defining Accountability

Finding appropriate school evaluation systems means clarifying the relationship between assessment and accountability. The Annenberg Institute, which has recently established a website for School Accountability Tools suggests:

“Accountability is the obligation or responsibility to demonstrate effectiveness,

and it has four components:

1. the development of standards that define desired outcomes
2. the evaluation or assessment of progress towards those outcomes
3. analysis of the resulting data
4. corrective action based on that knowledge.”

Such a process goes beyond mere accounting - the gathering, organizing and reporting of information. Accountability uses data to make judgments about where we need to adjust behaviors to improve results. Accountability involves a constant cycle of assessment, *analysis and action* to improve future performance.

Joan Green, the chief of Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office, made this clear in the first round of that province’s mandatory provincial testing of skills in reading and math in 1997: “We believe large-scale assessment can contribute to positive educational change when it engages educators, parents and students in thought and discussion about what takes place in the classroom. We are committed to a cycle of assessing and reporting that leads to action.”

In education, as in other endeavors, the ultimate danger is not in doing poorly, but in *not knowing* one is doing poorly. Calgary Public Schools, the second largest school district in Canada, recently struggled with provincial test data that showed their students lagged significantly behind Calgary Catholic students in math performance. The results were an invitation to discover what the Catholic system was doing to generate better math results and to remedy the problem.

Tests are not Enough

Achievement scores alone, however, have limited power to improve student learning. It is only when school communities have the will and capacity to reflect upon a range of data and utilize it for future performance planning, that assessment will be valued.

Testing reveals what students know and are able to do in core competencies we expect them to master. But test scores alone do not provide sufficient information on school success. We need a broad range of indicators including parent and student satisfaction levels, attendance rates, school leadership, community involvement, and valuable student learning which cannot be captured by exams. Schools will need to develop reliable tools for measuring their own school-specific goals in other than core learning. Complimentary use of internal and external evaluation can point schools to the path for necessary change to improve student outcomes. (Marchesi 1998) This *total performance feedback* provides useful guidance for practitioners.

As Michael Fullan observes, “The way to deal with potential misuse of student performance data is to become assessment literate. Schools put themselves in the driver’s seat when they invest in professional development and collaborative cultures that focus on student learning and associated improvements in instructional practices.”

Successful schools are now grappling head-on with building their capacity for improvement. We know from the research findings that this requires developing deeply embedded school practices and habits that strengthen the focus on results. The challenge is how to “re-culture” every school to achieve this.

Building Capacity to Respond

If we wish to encourage Canadian schools to use results to improve student success, the system must be designed in a way that both identifies problem areas and enables those responsible to respond. Early accountability systems often failed because they attempted to employ top-down approaches which ignored the high-involvement principles at the local level necessary to impact student learning.

School improvement is a highly complex and collaborative exercise. No single magic solution or simplistic measure will work for all schools. The task of educating very diverse learners to much high standards of learning in a world of with fast-changing educational demands will require more responsive schools than present bureaucracies allow. High-performance schools require a high level of autonomy and flexibility at the school site. (Darling-Hammond, 1996). Engagement of the total individual school community in designing solutions and responses to their unique learning environment must be possible in any accountability plan.

When responsibility for quality moves to the school level, new challenges will arise. As school control over staffing is recognized as a critical element in school success, teachers will be hired by schools, not by systems. Bargaining models must be adapted to accommodate school-based agreements which offer individual schools the flexibility needed to implement their vision. We must find more powerful ways to engage the community in school decisions, action plans and implementation. Professional development must be deepened and linked directly to school performance goals. Schools will require time to plan, train, reflect and interact in their on-going quest for school improvement. Equity issues must be addressed. As schools geared to high performance attract more resources and better teachers and programs, we will need to devise mechanisms for leveling *up* the playing field for schools that fall

behind.

Creating Incentives that Work

Some practices are emerging as policymakers attempt to create a climate in which all schools can become centers of excellence. The question to ask of each strategy will be, How well *does it raise student achievement over time?*

Setting Targets

Governments can influence system performance by analyzing strengths and weaknesses and identifying improvement targets. Some provinces such as Alberta, Newfoundland and P.E.I. have developed multi-year education business plans. Alberta Education's *Three-year Business Plan* publishes comparative progress with previous years on a wide variety of provincial indicators, and announces specific targets for the following years. Schools and boards are required to develop annual education plans aligned with the targets and report on their progress. This act of quantifying goals has focused attention, resources and efforts on the result.

Publishing School Profiles

Ontario's North York School District publishes a detailed annual profile of all schools in a binder for parents. A four-page report card on each school provides test results, demographics, special programs and school improvement plans, giving parents assessment information in a meaningful context. Thirty-four US states now require all schools to publish such annual school progress report cards. Some districts make school profiles available on the web.

Resistance to the release of school performance data by the practitioners is common across the Canadian system. It is fueled by the often blatant examples of misuse of data, such as the raw ranking of schools. The fundamental principle of using data to spur performance, however, is that each school competes against its own previous results. This *value-added format* in conjunction with sufficient contextual data can be helpful to all schools, even those which serve disadvantaged students. Schmoker (1996, 97) finds ample evidence to suggest that direct scrutiny of individual school results year on year is the most effective way to narrow the gap between high and low income students.

School Based Processes for Examining Achievement

In some provinces, individual school councils are mandated to develop and oversee school improvement plans. Nova Scotia's school councils must "prepare an annual accountability report describing school improvement activities undertaken during the year and the specific results achieved." Some systems such as British Columbia require a cyclical school accreditation process which includes self and peer-review components. In many jurisdictions,

internal school evaluations are combined with an external quality review process by a government agency. Britain and New Zealand provide good models for these.

Performance Incentive Plans

In Dallas, Texas teacher and principal performance rewards are tied to learning results. Each year, \$2.4 million is awarded to school staffs where 'value-added' in student learning outcomes is highest. Schools

compete against their own previous scores, not against arbitrary norms. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, a school evaluation plan combines achievement results-based evaluations with cash bonus awards. Bonuses are awarded to schools meeting their improvement targets in a variety of measures.

More than a dozen states are experimenting with such cooperative performance incentive plans (CPI). The premise is that when an entire school community works together to raise student performance over its own previous benchmarks, there are more positive results than with plans that merely reward individual efforts. CPI plans may take 3-5 years to fully implement. Further evaluation is needed to determine if they have been more effective than earlier individual merit pay plans.

Conditions leading to success of CPI programs have been defined as open access to information, site-based decision making, a support system that helps schools interpret and assess data, persistence and a significant commitment of resources. (Richards, 1993) Perceived fairness is critical to a CPI plan's acceptance, with care taken to ensure a level playing field and that progress for each unit is measured on a value-added basis. Districts that have successfully implemented CPI programs have sought cooperative input from the field at all phases of design and implementation. Rewards must be commensurate with the level of effort required to attain and be linked to professional development. (Kelley, 1996).

School Performance Contracts

Districts such as Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore have established pilot public schools under specific performance contracts to fill unmet educational needs in the district. Baltimore, for example, sought proposals geared to under-served and disadvantaged students. By a joint agreement between the union and the district, these contract schools are given wide latitude from district and contract regulations to encourage innovative efforts to improve student achievement.

Charter schools expand this principle of autonomy for accountability. These alternative public schools (now numbering 1037, USA) are established as independent legal entities which may continue to exist only if students demonstrate results specified in their charter. Renewal of the charter every three to five years is based on school success in meeting those educational goals. Comprehensive research now underway in (U.S. Department of Education, 1998 and others) and Canada (Bosetti 1998) will determine the success of the charter movement in raising student achievement.

Personnel Practices Tied to Achievement:

There is a growing understanding of the need to place a high priority on the quality of instruction in the classroom, rendered next-to-impossible by many collective agreements. A groundbreaking 1997 Seattle Public Schools teacher contract alters teacher evaluation and hiring provisions. It ties teacher assignment to skills required by the school and links teacher evaluations to gains in student achievement. Oregon has eliminated teacher tenure. The NEA has adopted resolutions supporting effective monitoring of teacher quality.

In forecasts of schools and teaching in the 21st century, some education labor experts predict increasing decentralization. When teachers are hired by individual schools on contracts reflecting the goals of the school, their unions will shift their focus from job control, work rules and uniformity to organizing

around professional competence, quality assurance and increased productivity. Teachers will gain the right to make workplace-specific decisions and assume responsibility for education performance. (Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres, 1997) Carefully designed competency-based pay to reward skills attained, combined with school team awards for collaborative achievement of performance goals, will provide the incentives teachers need to develop the skills to perform to heightened expectations. (Kelley, 1996).

Interventions in Failing Schools

Some policymakers are intervening where assessment shows persistent failure to improve student learning. When Chicago Superintendent Paul Vallas placed over 100 schools on academic probation in 1997, test results show marked improvement across the district. The largest gains were made by the poorest performing students, where schools on probation changed instructional methods and extended the school day. Failing students were required to attend summer classes to meet tough new standards or repeat the grade.

Chronically low-performing schools usually have limited capacity on their own to make the changes necessary to improve achievement. Such schools require not only pressure but support. More attention is being paid to district and state roles identifying failing schools, providing technical assistance and evoking a collaborative process involving all stakeholders to redesign these schools.

A positive track record combatting school failure can now be documented in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) and Britain (Barber, 1998). Twenty-three U.S. states have adopted 'academic bankruptcy' provisions, allowing them to intervene directly in persistently low-performing schools. These measures range from additional training and resources, to replacing district or school leadership, replacing school staff, or closing the school. Britain introduced the notion of 'zero tolerance of under-performing schools' in 1997 through measures such as setting challenging achievement targets individually for each school, enhancing annual school league tables to show degree of student improvement, and tackling failing schools. This is to be accomplished through focused support followed, only if necessary, by take-over by a successful school, or re-opening under new management.

Conclusion

There are now many strategies available for policymakers to link assessment and accountability to improve student learning. Truly effective evaluation systems will change the internal dynamics of our schools and nurture the leadership and flexibility required to design and implement pathways to success for every school.

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