

Accountability Demands Involvement

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Educational assessment, decentralization, educational audits, cost effectiveness, performance contracts, behavioral objectives—these are efforts at establishing accountability in education. More and more often parents, citizens, the government, board members—even *educators*—are beginning to hold individuals responsible for attaining specific results in schools. A recent Gallup survey of the public's attitudes toward the schools reveals that 61 percent of public school parents felt a teacher should be paid on the basis of the quality of his work. They strongly (68 percent) favor a system that would hold teachers and administrators more accountable for the progress of students. A remarkable 60 percent of those surveyed indicated they were against tenure for teachers.¹

Unlike the past, when failure to learn was seen as a weakness in the student, the developing view is that if pupils have not learned, the teacher has not taught. Minority parents have ceased to accept the idea that their children are to blame when achievement is far below the national average. They feel the educators are responsible for poor pupil performance.

A major factor which has precipitated accountability is the skyrocketing cost of

education and the greatly improved teacher salaries. Now, parents say, "If we're paying *that* much, we want results!"

Increased skill in evaluation and improved tools which permit more exact assessment have also helped foster the move toward accountability; so have the developments in the field of management techniques which have spurred sharpening of goals, specificity of planning, and the establishment of cost effectiveness measures.

What Is Accountability?

What is this "accountability" that is at the center of the cyclone currently surrounding education? As a working definition, we could say accountability is:

Holding an individual or group responsible for a level of performance or accomplishment for specific pupils. (Often the accountability focuses on pupils in a given school or classroom and is related to a specific skill area [usually one or more of the three Rs].)

Leon Lessinger, perhaps the most important figure in the accountability controversy, defines the term as "the ability to deliver on promises."

Having provided a definition, it be-

¹ American Federation of Teachers. "The Schools: Scapegoats or Sinners?" *American Teacher* 55 (3): 20; November 1970.

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comes obvious that, once defined, the concept raises more questions than it answers. For instance, exactly *who* is to be responsible? Specifically *what* are they responsible for? (General goals? Performance objectives?) *Who specifies* what the individual is to be accountable for? *Who decides* if the specified level of performance or accomplishment has been reached? *Who does what* to *whom* if the level is *not* reached?

With more than a little irony, it has been stated that at this point there is only one person in education who is truly accountable in the total sense of the term; that is the college football coach. The charge to him is clear: produce a winning team! He usually has access to needed resources and the results of his efforts are seen by thousands every weekend during the season. The score of the game is posted for all to see, and when his win-loss record sinks too low, he is fired. What could be more accountable than that?

Strengths of Accountability

Those who see the move toward accountability as a good development point out that such well-defined responsibility will have many positive outcomes. If specific individuals are to be accountable, they must know exactly what results are sought. Therefore the goals of the instructional program will have to be made crystal clear. Teachers and students both will have to know what is expected. New emphasis will be placed on diagnosing and meeting learner needs. It is likely that program goals will more and more often be stated in performance terms. Behavioral objectives will be developed for each activity, thus clarifying the purposes and goals of all programs and making it possible more easily to assess results.

To reach the required level of sophistication, educators will have to develop greater skill in goal setting, diagnosis of needs, and analysis of learning problems. An intensification of prescriptive teaching, individualization of instruction, and personalized evaluation will take place. Better learning on the part of pupils and better attitudes

toward school should be a result. Increased emphasis on improved communication and involvement of pupils and parents will be a necessity. This intense participation should result in better understanding and support of the school program.

Dangers in Accountability

Many persons are threatened by the idea of accountability, and even more are disturbed by the apparent way in which the concept is being implemented. A major cry from the teachers is that standards for them and for the pupils are likely to be set from above. They fear that the required levels of performance will be unrealistic and unobtainable, thus triggering punitive actions toward pupils and teachers. The classroom teacher does not wish to be the scapegoat when the school system does not produce what the parents, the board, or the administration demands. Teachers also point out that while they are likely the ones to be held accountable, they often do not have the resources or power to alter policies or practices which must be changed if improvements are to come about. They cannot, on their own, buy materials, hire consultants, assign pupils, initiate new curricula, yet these steps are often necessary if a change in the program is to take place.

Another valid point is that schools are not the only factor in a pupil's education. Much of what a student learns depends on experiences provided in other settings (the home or community) over which the school has little control. A teacher who is accountable for raising the academic performance level of a "culturally deprived" pupil has a much tougher job than in moving youngsters from an advantaged background to the same level of achievement.

Many worry that implementation of accountability will cause education to focus on a narrow band of elements in instruction which can be easily identified and measured—most likely, the area of academic achievement. The other goals of the school (for example, the affective domain) may be neglected. Also, it is possible that the pres-

sure to "perform" and to reach specific levels of achievement will engender stress in pupils and teachers. We may also see an increase in "teaching-for-the-test," to assure the best possible performance by pupils and thus protect the teacher.

It is certain that accountability will strengthen and increase the educational bureaucracy (which, in the minds of many, already constitutes a serious impediment to improving instruction). If levels of performance are to be set and if monitoring of progress is to take place, someone will have to be responsible for these functions—and a new cog in the institutional wheel will be created.

A problem seldom mentioned by critics of accountability is that it will call for *change*. We will have to operate in new ways. We will have to learn new skills, develop new attitudes, and establish new relationships. This aspect of accountability may be its most threatening, yet the most promising, possible outcome.

Successful Accountability

Obviously, we will be seeing more and more evidence of efforts at accountability in the schools. It is likely that many of these attempts will not be successful. Perhaps examining some of the characteristics of a successful system of accountability will be helpful.

1. *The nature and extent of the accountability will have to be clearly defined and realistically delineated.*

Broad or sloppily specified outcomes will not be tolerated, for without well-defined objectives those who are to judge whether or not a goal has been reached will not be able to make a good decision. In addition, the individuals or groups responsible for the outcome will demand that they know specifically what they are to achieve and will make certain that the goal is attainable.

2. *The individual (or group) who is to be accountable for accomplishing a given task must have a sizable measure of control*

over the identification of the task, the manner in which the task is to be undertaken, the resources required, and the means and methods of evaluation.

It is unfair and unrealistic to expect a teacher to be accountable for goals which he has had no role in setting, when he cannot choose or control the methods used to accomplish the task, and when the resources necessary to do the job are not available. It is equally inappropriate to expect a student to work resolutely toward reaching objectives which he has had no part in setting. For these reasons, whoever is to be held accountable must participate in goal setting and in selection of methods and materials. Unless these prerogatives are present, it is doubtful that the concept of accountability will ever be successfully implemented. Unless the rules of the game are fair, it will be impossible to find anyone foolish enough to play.

3. *In-service education will be an important initial and ongoing part of implementing a successful system of accountability.*

The teachers and administrators involved will have to develop a sophisticated set of skills in the areas of goal setting, formulating performance criteria and behavioral objectives, parent and pupil involvement, shared decision making, diagnosis of learning problems, prescriptive teaching and individualized instruction, and evaluation.

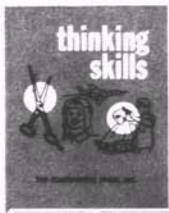
4. *Instituting a system of accountability will require establishing new relationships and taking on new roles.*

Under a sensible system of accountability, many more individuals (citizens, parents, students, teachers, and administrators) will be involved in the governance of the school. The administrator will not rule his school without the participation of his staff and community. No longer will what the teacher does in the classroom be secret; it will be general knowledge. Parents, citizens, teachers, and even students from other classes will be frequent visitors to see what is going on, to make suggestions, and to learn the unique skills of the teacher in that

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classroom. Some staff members will be more skilled than others in knowledge of sources of materials, the use of certain techniques, or the teaching of specific skills. The school staff will become differentiated, with each person contributing that which he does best. Because there will be overall school goals for which all staff members will be held responsible, there will be much more interaction among staff and much more common planning. For instance, if improved pupil self-concept or better written communication is a school goal, these topics will be everyone's business. The math teacher, for instance, will willingly recognize that the quality of the arithmetic written assignment is important and that just "getting the right answer" is not the sole objective.

A Model for Accountability

What would a system of accountability look like which embraced the characteristics just enumerated? One model would consist

of extensive teacher, parent, and pupil participation in setting three kinds of goals: (a) goals for each learner, (b) goals for the class, and (c) goals for the school. While there would undoubtedly be considerable overlap, let us deal briefly with how each of these would be established.

● *Student personal and academic goals* would come about through one or more one-to-one discussions between the pupil and the teacher. The student would have an opportunity to enumerate some objectives he feels important; for example, to be able to climb the rope in gym, speak in front of the class without trembling, or master the multiplication tables. At some stage, with the pupil present, one or both parents would also discuss with the teacher what they hope their child will accomplish during the school year. These goals might be academic or social in nature. The teacher would be a major contributor to the setting of the goals for the individual learner. He would describe to the student and the parents what he feels the

youngster should work on and what is reasonable to expect to be accomplished.

The teacher would have well in mind the pupil's strengths and weaknesses and would specify important areas which should be focused upon. The teacher would also help to make sure that the objectives set were realistic for the learner, and would aid the child and the parent in phrasing goals in performance terms. There would be an established process by which goals would be adjusted in light of new data about the factors impinging on the learner. Formal and informal means of evaluating to what extent goals have been achieved would also be suggested by the teacher for each goal area, once the objectives have been initially agreed on by the pupil, the parent, and the teacher. These measures would include use of standardized tests, teacher- and student-made instruments, observation schedules, and other methods of data collection appropriate to the goals.

- *General class goals* would be set as a result of several meetings involving students, parents, and the building administration. These sessions would be devoted to discussing with parents and students what overall class goals would be advisable. These objectives could relate to achievement as measured by standardized tests, and the criteria for measuring success would be the amount of movement of the *class mean*. Social and emotional progress of the class as a whole might also be a part of the goal setting.

- *Overall school goals* would also be developed. Again, parents and pupils would be involved, as would interested citizens. Representatives of local government, the board of education, and the central office would also participate in goal setting on this level. Common goals for the school district and the state would be presented, as would the aspects of the school program which are legal requirements. From these sources and from the discussions held on the classroom level, a set of schoolwide goals would be developed and performance criteria stated.

Often the overall school goals might

take the form of a theme for the month or school year, where each teacher and student would strive to focus some effort on a common topic such as better citizenship or improved human relations. The overall school goals would also reflect state or national priorities such as physical fitness or drug abuse education. Class level and individual goals may be closely related to, or aspects of, the schoolwide objectives.

- *All participants would accept some accountability.* In each instance, for each goal the parties involved (students, teachers, and parents) would help decide not only what is to be accomplished but what *they* are to be responsible for. For instance, parents would see that a proper place to study is provided their child. They would devote the time necessary to drill a student at home, if that was required to reach one of the goals. Students would help decide what their role and responsibility would be in reference to each goal. Obviously, the teacher would indicate what part he could play, and might well work with the principal or other teachers to develop needed skills to carry out his role properly. The principal would indicate what resources and assistance could be made available for use in connection with school or classroom goals. Under this procedure, each child (with the help of his teachers and parents) would be accountable to reach the goals he had set in cooperation with his teachers and parents. Each teacher would be accountable for reaching the general class goals which he had set in cooperation with the parents, principal, and students. The staff, the principal, and the students would be accountable for reaching the overall school goals. In this way, each individual or group becomes responsible for attaining goals that make sense to him (them) and that he (they) had a role in setting.

This suggested approach to accountability is demanding in terms of time and energy. It should be recognized, however, that learning how to plan, set goals, organize, and evaluate are vital skills for students to learn and an important part of the role of the teacher. □

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