

Coping with the Myth of Accountability

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Many proponents of accountability would apply the principles of American business to education. While the "efficiency" promised by accountability models is appealing, educators must ask: Where are these models succeeding?

Educators, warned Raymond E. Callahan,¹ especially administrators, have adopted an inappropriate set of values, based on the business ethic of assembly-line efficiency. Now, under the aegis of "accountability," a new breed of latter-day efficiency expert is spreading a religious-like, educational doomsday message that the schools are in trouble because they are not conducted like "typical" American businesses.

Accountability, as a concept, has been popularized by Leon Lessinger. In *Every Kid a Winner*,² he tends to simplify the totality of educational problems and proposes a set of very simple solutions, (that is, to base instruction on outcomes and hire educational auditors to check them).

Accountability and Myth

Supporters of the accountability movement have claimed that the road to human betterment

is through the organizational machinery and *laissez-faire* competitive ethics of American business. In *Every Kid a Winner*, Lessinger stated that:

If one airplane in every four crashed between takeoff and landing, people would refuse to fly. If one automobile in every four went out of control and caused a fatal accident or permanent injury, Detroit would be closed down tomorrow.

Our schools—which produce a more important product than airplanes or automobiles—somehow fail one youngster in four. And so far we have not succeeded in preventing the social and economic fatalities every school dropout represents.³

¹ R. E. Callahan. *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

² Leon Lessinger. *Every Kid a Winner: Accountability in Education*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1970.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Using the business-myth analogy, Lessinger portrays school dropouts as not merely acquiring lower social status, but as becoming social and economic fatalities. Any such failing individual can expect to become a "perpetual ward of the state or a minimal contributor to the economy," he states.⁴ In Lessinger's portrayal, the society is burdened by the poor educational achievement of those below an acceptable scholastic median. They represent fallen children, fatalities, lost souls. Such lost souls are not only personal failures, according to this perspective, but they also prevent the country from realizing a romantic vision of perfection.

Lessinger promises that, through accountability, "We can transform our schools within this decade."⁵ However, he neglects to mention to what they will be transformed, save to more highly bureaucratic organizations with contracted educational engineering, management support-groups, prebidding conferences, best bidders, and independent educational-accomplishment auditors.⁶

The quest-for-paradise myth has historically been used as a strategy for unlimited development—but evaluation of the progress of such development cannot be achieved without specified limits by which to measure that progress! Social critics have employed the quest myth to lambaste groups for being neglectful and ignorant, for earning their own misfortunes. Such critics then usually call upon those criticized to save themselves by studying technology and business to improve their methods.⁷ This is the approach of the accountability movement, and its proponents lambaste public schools as fountainheads of lost souls and as roadblocks to the transformation of society through progress.

Such criticism may have been credible in the late nineteenth century when industry was the model for societal development.⁸ But today, it fails to explain the complex interrelationships among business, government, and labor and the resulting impact on the present educational environment.

Technological innovation and the values and procedures of business enterprise are appealing to the average school administrator. Although the mythical values of technology (and of the business enterprise that produces it) have been both vehicles to progress and corruptors of

civilization, school critics tend to ignore this dichotomy.⁹ Conservative economic and political spokespersons have asserted that democracy produces free enterprise, and free enterprise, in turn, produces technology. This image of the myth holds that without democracy and free enter-

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prise, there can be little progress. However, Sidney Fine has observed that historically this myth has been "a brand of liberalism that tended to establish economic freedom as an end in itself rather than a means to an end."¹⁰ And, humanists have held that business management and machinery are inherently dehumanizing.¹¹

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁷ R. Hofstadter. *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* New York: Random House, Inc., 1955. pp. 28-30.

⁸ That business is no longer a positive societal model is reflected in the Louis Harris survey of February 9, 1973, which showed American business to be under broad criticism from the public. American businesses were perceived as being uninterested in the communities in which they operate. The respondents to the Harris survey generally concluded that there was "deterioration in the quality of goods and services" being provided the citizens of our country.

⁹ Historian Leo Marx has noted a dichotomous image of American enterprise and technology as the purveyor of progress and, conversely, as the pollutant of the quality of life. See: Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

¹⁰ Sidney Fine. *Laissez-Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study in the Conflict in American Thought, 1864-1901.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967. p. 31.

¹¹ R. F. Bundy. "Accountability: A New Disneyland Fantasy." *Phi Delta Kappan* 56: 176; November 1974.

Accountability and the Change Process

The principle of accountability relies heavily on the appeal of the free-enterprise-and-technology myth to justify its approach. Lessinger asserts that the same technology that put men on the moon can be applied to the improvement of education—that the method of management “on which leading firms rely, but which our schools have ignored” will bring this improvement to education.¹²

The methodology of accountability is thus to put schools under the supervision of professional management, as is the practice with big business. However, while certain similarities between business and school administration have been noted,¹³ there are many activities of school districts that the business/management schematic fails to explain. The management approach conveys much about the authority structure of the schools, but it is less adequate in regard to other types of power: (a) the force of mass movements such as teachers' strikes, (b) the effect of collective bargaining negotiations in counterbalancing legislative power, (c) the power of the expertise of professional teachers and educational administrators, and (d) the public appeals to emotion and sentiment that sway the direction of school systems.

The management approach to schooling explains much about the formal structure but very little about the change processes that give the structure its dynamic capabilities. Additionally, the management approach deals with the formal organizational structure at any one point in time, but it does not explain how the educational organization changes over time. Lastly, the management approach does not thoroughly explain the critical function of policy formulation. Rather, it explains how policies are carried out in the most efficient fashion after they have been established.¹⁴

Accountability advocates have not dealt with policy formulation or curriculum planning; instead they have adopted, in an authoritarian manner, a few select methodological innovations in instruction, which were developed in the past two decades, and implied that these adaptations of the systems approach will improve schooling. Carefully prescribed curricular strategies are assumed to be amenable to business-management

plans. This leads to the conception of the teacher as a “manager of instruction”—not as one concerned about human beings, but as one who is simply a manager. Yet, no empirical research basis for the “management plan” of accountability advocates has been established!¹⁵

Accountability Lacks Conceptual Framework

Accountability systems have as their agenda “managing” educational activities, yet they lack the conceptual framework to understand the priorities of that which they purport to manage. Sarason¹⁶ identified three points pertinent to the weaknesses of accountability models. The first is the *complexity of each role* in the school environment. Each teacher, administrator, and school-staffer, by necessity, responds—according to role—to demands, built-in conflicts, and responsibilities in terms of his or her relationship to other types of roles and in terms of the overall subculture of the school. Within these existing roles lie the foundations for change and improvement; no simple measure of the output of *successful* students can identify these crucial elements of change.

Second, any attempt to understand the prerequisites to improvement must recognize the school principal's critical role in determining the

¹² Lessinger, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹³ See: H. H. Shoup. *Bureaucracy in Higher Education*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1966.

¹⁴ J. V. Baldrige, editor. *Academic Governance: Research on Institutional Politics and Decision Making*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1971.

¹⁵ Addressing the questions of policy formulation and the generation of knowledge, Guba and Clark presented an analysis of the systems approach in the research and development (R&D) sector of education. From their analysis, they suggested that: (a) the systems approach has tended to produce unrealistic expectations, (b) the systems approach has resulted in centralization of policy development for federal R&D activities, and (c) the policies produced by the systems approach may not be relevant to what the field needs. See: E. G. Guba and D. L. Clark. “The Configurational Perspective: A New View of Educational Knowledge Production and Utilization.” *Educational Researcher* 4(4): 6-9; April 1975.

¹⁶ S. B. Sarason. *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*. Boston, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971.

fate of the change process. No districtwide or statewide measurement of achievement has yet accounted for the qualitative role of building-level leadership in the improvement or the degradation of the educational process.

Third, a prerequisite to change is the need to adopt an understanding of each role within the school culture, controlling the tendency to criticize. Criticism of the school can be beneficial, but when it takes the forms of "should" or "ought," it cannot provide the crucial guidance from the existing environment needed to fashion a better one.

Utilizing the preceding three points and the perspective of a social (rather than individual) psychology,¹⁷ humanists can, it is contended, outperform accountability enthusiasts in making schools better places in which children learn. The task at hand is to change and improve schools, not to create new ones resembling efficient factories.

Accountability does not account for policy formulation or for the *process* of change (such as is present in the selection of curricular methodology or the identification of teaching goals). It is completely utilitarian and mechanistic. The concept of merit pay, for example, can be applied with equal ease to the instructional goals of Middletown, U.S.A., and the World War II oven-keepers at Buchenwald.

Accountability does not account for a teacher's academic freedom or a student's right to the free interchange of ideas. Little wonder that Robert Bundy recently accused accountability of being a "smokescreen" rather than a real solution to problems schools face today. He maintains that, "Accountability, in short, is industrial consciousness applied to nonindustrial problems."¹⁸

Accountability Lacks Alternatives

Accountability advocates assert that their "systems" will help identify problems in the school. However, their lack of a conceptual framework, which prevents us from telling whether the problems identified by such systems are the most significant ones, also fails to provide schools with viable alternatives for ameliorating problems, when they are identified. But, of greater importance, accountability paradigms do not differentiate between causes, effects, and expediency!

The accountability movement proposes educational engineering, and the expected outcome should be a near-zero attrition rate, with every student being able to read, write, and compute at a basic level of competence. The rationale for the accountability approach is to prevent individuals from becoming societal burdens and noncontributors to the economy. Such characterization of the problem and of the proposed solution, simplistic in the nature of its truths, fails to address itself to the complexities of American life and American schooling.

The U.S. Office of Education, as a bureaucratic agency, has even fallen into this simplistic trap. Its bureaus and divisions are now attempting to force upon us a monolithic learning system (based on the tenets of operant conditioning) as the quasi-official educational policy of the nation. This is not only apparent in U.S. Office of Education grants, programs, and contracts, but it is also very apparent when one reviews the prototypes and emerging "competency-based teacher education" programs. The latter are yet another application of one single method: behavior modification (a very effective and powerful technique, but not the *only* technique).

Away from Myth to the Future

In education, there is the tendency to seek out technological triumphs (myths) to "save us" in problems associated with schooling. Instructional television, instructional systems, computer-aided instruction, programmed instruction, and many other artifacts—including the Planning, Programming, Budgeting System (PPBS), systems analysis, and so-called planning strategies—are used by educators at all levels. But our current dilemmas in general education and our specific

¹⁷ F. A. Beach has noted that humanistic educators have been too much taken with an "asocial theory of human behavior" based on concepts of human psychology. While the accomplishments in understanding the psychology of individuals should not be belittled, they have left us with preciously little in terms of comprehending the social organization of school culture. Only by understanding the social structure of schools and the dynamics of change can one see the mythical, rather than the "systematic" basis of accountability. See: F. A. Beach. "The Snark Was a Boojum." *American Psychologist* 5:115-24; 1950.

¹⁸ Bundy, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

dilemmas in reading, writing, and mathematics (three areas usually associated with accountability projects) have no technological solutions!

To offer effective solutions to problems (causes), educators must be aware of the suppositions and bases of the problems they identify and the solutions they suggest. Ralph Tyler and Michael Scriven¹⁹ have seriously criticized the narrowness of the way in which goals and objectives have been established and the way in which accomplishments of programs have been assessed. Myths, such as those discussed here, have proven to be serious, potentially harmful forces that limit the scope of our actions.

Our position is not to ignore the tremendous potential associated with educational technology. Yet, it is tragicomic to observe the number of computer-adopted terms (for example, input, output, interface, on-line) that abound in the vocabulary of accountability cultists. Such use of product-oriented terms shows precious little concern for humanness.

Humanists need to comprehend the weaknesses of accountability in concrete terms.²⁰ They desperately need coping skills for dealing with the popular and potentially harmful panacea offered by accountability enthusiasts. Educational accountability systems threaten any hope for a humanistic tradition, a tradition which has been a distinctive value of American educational theory.

Unfortunately, the term "accountability" subtly implies that other formats are "irresponsible." This semantic triumph is sufficient to sway state boards of education and legislators and frighten local school district trustees, as has been the case in Florida, California, Michigan, Colorado, and other states.

From the literature about accountability, one would assume that the doctrine has been thoroughly tested. For example, D. T. Campbell and J. C. Stanley have forcefully written that the experiment is:

... the only means for settling disputes regarding educational practice, ... the only way of verifying educational improvements, and ... the only way of establishing a cumulative tradition in which improvements can be introduced without the danger of a faddish discard of old wisdom in favor of inferior novelties. ...²¹

Yet, the concept of accountability is without empirical verification and ought to be identified

for what it is: a political expedient. The emphasis placed on the systems approach by most accountability advocates demonstrates that accountability is authoritarian mindlessness.

Accountability is an undefined concept with no operational meaning. In California, it is a statewide assessment of student achievement, some local school support programs, and evaluation of teachers. In Florida, it is specifying a mass of sterile performance objectives. The term is confused with assessment, performance contracting, PPBS, and even National Assessment! To many, accountability is perceived as a punitive mechanism that makes teachers pay for a poor job of teaching.

In Washington State, the latest state to fall victim to the accountability syndrome (1976), it means a legislative mandate that teachers write performance objectives for all basic skills classes in grades K-8. Criterion-referenced tests will be administered to a statewide sample to provide the legislature with a profile of achievement. Unfortunately, the legislators were misled to believe that such a mandate will—of necessity—improve the state's schools.

Countering the Tide

Accountability reports should be carefully analyzed and sternly criticized by all educators

¹⁹ See: Ralph Tyler. "Ralph Tyler Discusses Behavioral Objectives." *Today's Education* 62:41-46; 1973. See also: Michael Scriven. "Prose and Cons About Goal-Free Evaluation." *Evaluation Comment* 3(4): 1-4; December 1972.

²⁰ One specific weakness of the accountability model is that it can measure only its own "efficiency" criteria. As Knoell and McIntyre have pointed out, costs versus outcomes procedures in accountability systems are inapplicable to equal-opportunity and compensatory educational efforts. For example, Lessinger's accountability proposition was aimed at increasing the ability of schools to cope with the lower-achieving one-quarter of students. Yet, the low-achievers often take the most time and effort to educate; hence, they are, in absolute terms, "less efficient" for the schools to educate. See: D. Knoell and C. McIntyre. *Planning Colleges for the Community*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1975. p. 43. See also: Benjamin Bloom. *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964. p. 2.

²¹ D. T. Campbell and J. C. Stanley. *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research*. Chicago, Illinois: Rand McNally & Company, 1968.

and school board members and concerned citizens. The results of such analyses should then be given widespread publicity. This can be accomplished by presenting papers at educational conferences and even by calling press conferences or issuing press releases.

Furthermore, the items on the statewide testing programs should be analyzed to determine what the *state* considers important to test. If the items are not those that specific *schools* consider important, then educators should urge the schools' patrons to pressure legislators to stop the unproductive use of the taxpayers' dollars.

Testing is probably the crux of the current accountability fad. The general public is very confused about test results (especially the apparent drop in standardized test scores), as are the professionals. Harnischfeger and Wiley,²² concluding that achievement-test-score declines reflect a most complex problem, could not make any conclusive recommendations, even after a most thorough study of the phenomenon.

When textbooks and other instructional materials are considered for selection because of state-sanctioned tests for some specified bit of information, then there is precious little hope for the idealistic motives associated with humanistic enterprises or for genuine improvement in the schools.²³ By all means, use the criterion-referenced scores to modify instructional patterns, but recognize that accountability test results are of little use to teachers (if not totally useless), since the feedback is not immediate. Do not confuse learning theory, evaluation, reinforcement, and politics.

No less a scholar than James B. Conant warned in 1959 that if one were to judge American high schools of the day, it would have been "possible to make valid judgments about American secondary education, but only *school by school*."²⁴ Observe the logic of the Conant statement when contrasted with that of the broad use of accountability models now being enforced by the states.

In Conclusion

Advocates of educational accountability have failed to achieve their intended outcomes in at least three ways:

1. They have failed to deal with the complexities of the change process in the school environment;
2. They have failed to provide a conceptual framework for their "systems" to operate effectively in an educational setting;
3. They have failed to provide a means for identifying and developing viable, alternate learning strategies when problems in the instructional process have been shown to exist.

We acknowledge that the appeal of "efficiency" is difficult to counter. Yet, the accountability movement, with at least six years of application behind it, cannot show one case in which "efficiency" has been achieved, or in which the total achievement spectrum of pupils has been improved. The arguments for accountability must be countered with the challenge: Where is it succeeding? 

²² A. Harnischfeger and D. E. Wiley. *Achievement Test Scores Decline: Do We Need To Worry?* Chicago, Illinois: Central Midwestern Regional Educational Laboratory (CEMREL), Inc., 1975.

²³ For example, John W. Porter, State Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Michigan, has noted that the results of the criterion-referenced tests used in the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) "are recommended for use in textbook selection and in the consideration of instructional programs and certain individual and group learning needs." See: John W. Porter. "The Virtues of a State Assessment Program." *Phi Delta Kappan* 57:593-94; 1976.

²⁴ James B. Conant. *The American High School Today*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959. p. 16.



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