

The Role of Accountability in Kentucky's Education Reform Act of 1990

In an extraordinary ruling, Kentucky's Supreme Court Justices have declared that state schools are to be held accountable for the success of *all* students.

On June 8, 1989, in an unprecedented judicial decision, the Kentucky Supreme Court declared the state's public school system unconstitutional. Although the initial objective of a lawsuit filed in 1986 by 66 mostly rural school districts was to secure equitable and adequate funding for public schools, the high court went beyond the fiscal issues and found the entire state system of public education deficient and unconstitutional. The court declared that every aspect of the public school system should be reconsidered and a new system created no later than April 15, 1990.

The Supreme Court justices gave remarkable weight to student outcomes. The opinion cited various data including results from nationally normed tests, which the justices regarded as evidence that Kentucky students overall failed to receive an "adequate" education as required by the state constitu-

tion. The court concluded that a school system in which a significant number of children receive an inadequate education or ultimately fail is inherently inequitable and unconstitutional.

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In their concluding statements, the justices identified specific educational outcomes that every student should attain. Thus, the state's highest court made the attainment of certain student outcomes a constitutional obligation of the public schools.

The court decision required the state legislature to devise a system of public schools with the capacity to achieve these educational goals. The justices also held the state legislature responsible for monitoring the performance of the public schools to ensure that these goals were being attained in a reasonable manner. This latter provision clearly required that an outcome-based accountability system be an integral part of the restructured Kentucky school system.

Changing Expectations

Historically *all* children were not expected to master the entire curriculum. Universal education meant uni-

versal opportunity, not universal achievement. Schools were expected to sift and sort out the unmotivated and poor performing students in favor of those with some promise of academic excellence. In fact, the academic failure of a certain percentage of students was expected. An outcome different from that was often interpreted as indicating a lack of academic rigor. Kentucky now intends to hold its schools accountable for the failure of all students to learn. A high level of achievement is expected of all students. The Education Reform Act requires steady improvement in the percentages of students who exhibit the expected outcomes on a school site basis.

The debate over whether schools can overcome external circumstances that adversely affect learning will continue, but policymakers in Kentucky and elsewhere believe schools can be more effective with "at-risk" children than was previously thought possible. In fact, they are coming to believe that children are "at risk" of school failure primarily because the schools use unmoderated educational methods.

Establishing Student Outcomes

Five months prior to Kentucky's Supreme Court ruling, Governor Wallace G. Wilkinson created by executive order a Council on School Performance Standards to recommend what Kentucky students should know and be able to do at various stages in their educational programs and to suggest appropriate ways to assess how well students were achieving these learning objectives. The Council was made up of business executives, State Board of Education members, teachers, administrators, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the Secretary of the Education and Humanities Cabinet.

To gather opinions about what Kentucky's children should be learning, the Council members interviewed people in their communities, then held "focus group" meetings with cross sections of people in four regions of the state. In addition, the

Council asked the Survey Research Center at the University of Kentucky to survey 600 people selected at random and another 200 people in a stratified random sample based on membership in certain constituent groups to gain their perspectives on what children should know and be able to do after 12 years of public schooling. Finally, the Council sought advice from nationally recognized curriculum experts and practicing teachers within Kentucky on this matter.

After carefully reviewing the survey data and the reports prepared by the educational experts and classroom teachers, the Council came to the conclusion that Kentuckians want graduates to be able to use what they have learned—in their personal lives, at work, in the community, and at home. The Council then proposed that schools develop in all students the ability to:

1. Use basic communication and mathematical skills for purposes and situations they will encounter throughout their lives;

2. Apply core concepts from mathematics, the sciences, the arts, the humanities, and social studies to situations they will encounter throughout their lives;

3. Become self-sufficient individuals;

4. Become responsible members of a family, work group, or community, and demonstrate effectiveness in community service;

5. Think and solve problems in school situations and in a variety of situations they will encounter in life;

6. Connect and integrate experiences and new knowledge from all subject matter fields with what they have previously learned, and build on past learning experiences to acquire new information through various media sources.

The Education Reform Act of 1990 enacted by the Kentucky General Assembly and signed by Governor Wilkinson following the Supreme Court decision subsequently adopted these six learning objectives as the new Common Core of Learning and required the Council to frame these objectives in measurable terms.

Our New Assessment Methods

Our present methods of documenting learning are inadequate for measuring many of the outcomes set forth by the Council on School Performance Standards. The task now is to create prototypes of complex tasks that students can perform to demonstrate all these objectives in an interactive context. The tasks must have multiple objectives and require higher levels of thinking than is demanded by most paper-and-pencil examinations.

Clearly this approach to accountability requires the development of new ways of documenting student learning. At a minimum, the new assessments must elicit authentic performances through which students can accurately demonstrate their ability to develop, understand, and use knowledge as well as confirm their possession of specific information and learning skills. Students will be expected to successfully complete the designated tasks and accurately determine their own preparedness. The tasks might involve such activities as performing an experiment, assembling a portfolio of "best works," giving a performance, or keeping a journal that explains how to solve a particular problem.

All students will be expected to successfully perform any and all of the assessment tasks. Daily and weekly assessments of progress toward mastery of the various learning objectives will be required. According to local school board policy, each school must regularly report this progress to students and parents. The assessment will consist of comparing the performances of each student over a period of time with the level of attainment expected on each learning objective at certain points in the educational program. Kentucky has selected grades 3, 5, 8, and 12 as the "benchmark" points.

The State Assessment Process

The state assessment of students (in contrast to the local school assessment of students described above) requires all students at the benchmark grade level in each school to be able to demonstrate their ability to success-

fully perform tasks similar to the tasks students have been performing regularly as part of their classroom demonstrations. The student first confirms his or her own success. The teacher validates that assessment or points out the shortcomings and provides direct assistance in perfecting the task. The state assessment is an "audit" of these assessments to confirm their accuracy. The latter function is to ensure uniformity in the assessment of student performances across the state and to ensure accuracy in the reporting of student success.

School effectiveness is defined by the Reform Act in terms of the proportion of students who are successful. The act requires schools to meet a threshold level of improvement established by the State Board of Education, which includes at a minimum an increase in the proportion of students who perform at the benchmark level, maintain a desired level of attendance, and remain in school. The State Board for Elementary and Secondary Education establishes the improvement threshold level for each school site every two years.

The Relationship Between Accountability and Instruction

So long as test results are publicly scrutinized and school "quality" is measured by them, teachers will teach what these tests expect students to know and be able to do. In the new Kentucky system, we hope instruction will be consciously influenced by the assessment process. Classroom instruction will be designed to help students successfully perform the tasks identified by the state as examples of the attainment of the various learning objectives. The traditional testing program will be replaced with an array of student performances which incorporate all the learning objectives established by the state.

The intent of this policy is to focus teaching on guiding student learning rather than covering a certain amount of material of a "subject." In effect, the assessment tasks *become* the new curriculum, so they must be as rich and

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complex as the learning outcomes they purport to document. Staffs in the schools are free to organize their school resources and instructional practices in whatever way they believe is necessary to attain the desired student outcomes. This shift in the approach to assessment should lead to considerable restructuring of the instructional process.

What Lies Ahead in Educational Accountability?

It is now clear that state policymakers are zeroing in on a much different approach to accountability. Kentucky not only changed its expectations for the outcomes of 12 years of formal schooling, it also changed what will be assessed and increased the stakes for success. These are dramatic changes. Here are a few of the major challenges that will face educators in other states as their policymakers move in this new direction.

Although a growing number of states are urging educators to restructure their schools in ways they think will enable them to more effectively meet the learning needs of all children, policymakers are reluctant to entrust the future of schools to teachers and administrators without some clear method of assessing the effectiveness of their work.

As we press for more outcomes such as the ability to communicate effec-

tively, to think critically, to reason and solve problems, and to integrate and intelligently use knowledge, we must be prepared to invest heavily in more holistic, flexible, and creative approaches to the assessment process. Much research and development is needed on how to validly and reliably document the full range of educational outcomes expected of our students.

In a world where "quality" has come to mean "zero defects," policymakers are no longer interested in how students as a group are doing "on the average." They want to know how near we are to having every student learning at the highest level of which he or she is capable.

Finally, state policymakers are showing a continued interest in finding equitable and meaningful ways to enhance the rewards and penalties attached to the accountability system. Under the new law, Kentucky schools that show steady improvement will receive cash awards to be used as the majority of faculty in each school determine. A school that fails to improve or that actually declines in the proportion of students who attain the expected level of performance will be declared a "school in crisis." The faculty and administration of such a school will be subject to transfer or dismissal based on an outside evaluation and parents can request that their children be transferred to a more successful school of the superintendent's choice.

These new directions in accountability may very well constitute the most important aspect of current school reform. Since it is now clear that what we assess and reward influences what we teach, the kinds of outcomes we choose to measure and the methods we use to measure them will most certainly shape what our children will learn in our schools. Therefore, the kind of accountability system we create will likely have a more direct and immediate effect on the nature and focus of schooling than any other reform we will undertake. □

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