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*Educational Policy* 2013 27: 170 originally published online 9 November 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0895904812465119

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# Educational Accountability and Policy Feedback

Educational Policy  
27(2) 170–189  
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DOI: 10.1177/0895904812465119  
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## Abstract

Over the past 30 years, accountability policies have become more prominent in public K-12 education and have changed how teaching and learning are organized. It is less clear the extent to which these policies have altered the politics of education. This article begins to address that question through the lens of policy feedback. It identifies shifts in interest group coalitions and strategies as one of several elements of a new politics that has emerged in response to accountability policies, and it argues that the Common Core State Standards are a primary example of the feedback cycle influencing future policy.

## Keywords

education accountability, policy feedback, Common Core State Standards

Over the past 30 years, accountability policies governing public elementary and secondary education have evolved from a primary focus on fiscal probity with limited scrutiny of schooling processes and outcomes to policies where student performance on standardized tests constitutes the core element of an elaborate system for judging schools and imposing rewards and sanctions on them. That transition has been well documented (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009; Goertz, 2007; Manna, 2006; McDermott, 2011; McDonnell, 2008). Similarly,

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analysts have examined the effects of these accountability policies on schools and on their students' performance (e.g., Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Dee & Jacob, 2011; Hanushek & Raymond, 2005; Ladd & Lauen, 2011; National Research Council, 2011). However, an essential question for those interested in the politics of education policy has not been central in past research: To what extent have recent accountability policies altered the politics of education?

This article begins to address that question through the lens of policy feedback, an analytical framework for examining how policy design shapes political responses and, in turn, influences subsequent policies (Hacker, 2002; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Skocpol, 1992). The concept is based on the assumption that policies establish new institutional rules and structures or augment existing ones. These rules specify the conditions under which policies allocate benefits to some individuals and groups and impose costs on others. For interest groups and other political actors, these costs and benefits create incentives for mobilizing to protect their benefits or minimize their costs. At the level of the mass public, policies generate interpretative effects as individuals come to understand how costs and benefits affect them personally, and infer what that signals about their status as citizens (Pierson, 1993). These attitudinal effects capture the impact of policies on individuals' sense of political efficacy, perceptions of how deserving they are of public benefits, and their trust in government. The positive and negative incentives that policies produce create political dynamics that constitute feedback and shape future policy. This feedback may reinforce existing policy or may change it in significant ways.

In contrast to other policy areas such as health and social welfare where research is more developed, we know less about policy feedback in education. As this article illustrates, we can infer from past research how policy design influences the behavior of major policy actors, but data on how education policies affect public attitudes and behavior are limited. The hope is that by applying a policy feedback approach to accountability policy, researchers will see its value and test its applicability in other areas of education policy.

The contours of current state and federal accountability policies are described in the first section with a focus on the larger political and societal context in which they occur, and on the factors most likely to create policy feedback. The second section identifies several broad areas where elements of a new politics have emerged in response to accountability policies, and the third section argues that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a primary example of the feedback cycle influencing future policy. The final section suggests that the political dynamics resulting from accountability and related policies are not yet stable and could shift again over the next decade.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Political Evolution of Accountability Policy**

McDermott (2011) notes that most public accountability policies can be framed around a basic question: Who should be held accountable to whom for what? Major changes in education policy that address this question have concentrated on the “to whom” and “for what.” In the past, an internally focused bureaucratic model dominated, with “to whom” defined as each level of the education system answerable to the one above it. The role of external political actors was typically minimal and indirect, depending on whether education emerged as an issue in electoral campaigns. Over the past three decades, however, policy changes have widened the span of political accountability by moving states and the federal government into a dominant position as compared with local school boards and authorizing them to attach consequences to accountability judgments. The basis for making those judgments, the “for what,” has also expanded. Policy has moved from a traditional focus on accountability for finances and fairness to emphasize accountability for performance (Behn, 2001). This shift has meant that not only has the scope of accountability broadened to cover more aspects of the educational enterprise but it has also extended further down into the system and increased the influence of political authorities in shaping classroom behavior.

As Manna (2006) concluded, the evolution of accountability policy is the result of a mutual “borrowing strength” between the federal government and states. Although much of the current emphasis on accountability focuses on No Child Left Behind (NCLB), that law was only possible because policy entrepreneurs at the federal level were able to leverage policies that states had implemented in the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, while state policy makers may oppose the strictures imposed by NCLB, the law has allowed them to use the federal mandate to strengthen their own influence over local districts and schools. Consequently, contemporary educational accountability is a constellation of state and federal policies that functions as a policy monopoly. The basic policy idea of holding schools externally accountable through standardized testing of their students is now well-institutionalized (McDonnell, 2008).

Past analyses have identified a range of factors explaining the shift from a low-stakes, decentralized accountability system to the current high stakes one defined by federal and state policies. These include congressional and gubernatorial concerns that school districts have not used state and federal funds effectively (Rudalevige, 2003); a policy frame linking student achievement and the nation’s ability to compete in global markets (Rothman, 2011); a shift in definitions of equity away from access to educational resources and compliance with legal mandates to a focus on students’ learning opportunities and

achievement (McDermott, 2011); and a desire to make educational outcomes more transparent and reduce the information asymmetry between educators' knowledge about what happens in schools and what policy makers and their constituents know (Gormley & Weimer, 1999; McDonnell, 2004).

In illustrating a policy feedback perspective on accountability, Figure 1 lists the factors identified in past research as contributing to federal and state policies. Although they vary across jurisdictions in their details, each embodies a set of core rules and structures which, in turn, have generated a range of political effects as different interests have responded to them. Those responses have influenced subsequent iterations of federal and state policy.

### *Policy Rules and Structures*

The impetus for new accountability policies has influenced their design. Above all, the emphasis on transparency through the reporting of outcome data required that indicators of performance be readily measurable and easily understood. Not surprisingly, assessments have come to serve that function, and student scores on standardized tests are now the primary measure by which schools and teachers are evaluated. Their low cost, long-established use in education, and pervasiveness in the larger society have meant that assessments dominate education policy, despite rhetoric about broader standards-based reforms with linked curricular goals, instructional resources, and teacher professional development. The desire to make schools more efficient, effective, and publicly accountable has resulted in a second design element. Multiple policy instruments have been used, including mandates to test students and report scores, and incentives in the form of school status and resource levels—and more recently, teacher compensation—linked to student assessment results. At the same time, because information lies at the core of this policy, the targets encompass more than just educators and students. They also include parents and the general public who are expected to act on the information.

In determining whether recent accountability policies have altered education politics, it is necessary also to consider the larger political context in which they were formulated. Two broader trends are reflected in the design of education accountability policies. The first is the move in a variety of policy areas away from accountability models based on adherence to rules and scrutiny of agency outputs to ones focused on performance and outcomes. The second trend is the significant expansion of the institutions authorized to deliver publicly funded goods and services. Kamarck (2007) describes several different models for “reinvented government,” ranging from traditional government bureaucracies run like private sector firms to networks of providers composed



of government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit firms; and even governments creating new markets. What is common to these different models is the inclusion of a range of providers. This diversification is reflected in the implementation of education accountability policies through a variety of public and private sector arrangements for producing and delivering tests, instructional materials, professional development, and technical assistance.

### *Likely Political Effects*

Based on an examination of the political evolution of accountability policy and its core design elements, we might expect the politics to change in several significant ways as additional consequences have been attached to student assessment scores. One likely political effect stems from changes in institutional rules and structures. For example, altering who is accountable and for what has meant that those being held accountable are more precisely identified than in the past at the level of individual teachers whose value-added scores—based on their students' test performance—are being publicly reported. So, a question arises about whether pushing the costs of accountability down to school-level staff will generate incentives for them to mobilize to oppose or alter the policy. Besides the potential for mobilization, changes in rules and structures may also alter existing patterns of governance as elected officials and administrators respond to the demands that new policies impose.

Second, we already know from the politics surrounding the passage of NCLB that shifts in definitions of equity from emphasizing resource inputs and procedural compliance to pressing for equal learning opportunities and achievement have divided civil rights groups and generated tensions within the Democratic Party (Rhodes, 2011). At the same time as civil rights groups have diverged in their objectives, other interests, such as governors, foundations, and the business community, have entered the education policy making arena with other accountability agendas. Consequently, we might expect a rearrangement of traditional interest group coalitions.

A third way politics might change depends on whether the information about school performance that accountability policies produce will prompt parents and others to mobilize. That likelihood raises a larger issue about what Moffitt and Cohen (2010) call the "politics of bad news." They argue that evidence of implementation failure can be used as a policy instrument to mobilize additional resources for program improvement, or it can have the effect of threatening the policy and eroding the legitimacy of implementing institutions. They note that "by requiring reports on proficiency, the policy [in this case, NCLB] was *explicitly designed to produce bad news*, [emphasis in original] on the view that very public bad news would drive practice

improvement” (p. 27). The “politics of bad news” illustrates the type of interpretative effects that policies may produce. The meanings that parents and the public ascribe to accountability results may depend on how the good or bad news is framed, and how they respond to phrases such as “all students can achieve to high standards” juxtaposed against terms such as “schools needing improvement” or “failing schools.” The interpretative responses that bad news and other aspects of accountability policy produce accumulate over time constituting positive or negative feedback that shapes future policies.

A fourth potential source of emergent politics is the changing nature of the education delivery system. Its growing complexity and diversity could lead to a broader range of interests pressing their demands on the political system and making effective governance more challenging. Although it is an unlikely outcome for accountability policy, we also need to consider a final possibility. Not all policies, even major ones, produce feedback. Patashnik and Zelizer (2009) conclude that the political impact of policy changes may be negligible or dissipate over time. They identify three common reasons why positive feedback might not arise: weak policy design, inadequate or conflicting institutional supports, and poor timing. They note that “these conditions may be unintended byproducts of the policy development process or they may result from deliberate attempts by opponents to prevent a new policy from durably reconfiguring governing possibilities for the long term” (p. 4).

## **Elements of a New Politics of Educational Accountability**

Consistent with what a policy feedback model would predict, educational accountability policies—most notably NCLB—have altered education politics. They have contributed to shifts in interest group coalitions and strategies, denser interest group and provider networks, interpretative effects that have led to limited but potentially far-reaching parental mobilization, and feedback loops that prompted policy entrepreneurs to seek changes in the dominant policy monopoly. However, two caveats are in order: these shifts in political dynamics evolved over a period of several decades and did not occur abruptly; and although accountability policies were a prime motivator for the changes, other policies, such as those related to school choice, were also responsible.

### *Interest Group Mobilization*

Unlike other policies such as Medicare and Social Security where the benefits are well-defined and individually targeted, the assumed benefits of educational accountability are collective, longer term, and less immediately

visible. However, the perceived costs have been especially evident to classroom teachers and the organizations that represent them. Teacher union opposition to accountability policies stems largely from how student scores are now being used, especially as proxy measures of teacher quality. They have also objected to the tenor of discussion in the media and among elected officials that places significant blame on teachers for the problems of public education. That sentiment was captured in a speech by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president, Randi Weingarten (2010): “never before have I seen so few attack so many, so harshly, for doing so much—often with so little.”

In formulating their positions on test-based accountability, the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA) face a major dilemma. Their members are feeling the brunt of what many believe is unfair scrutiny, and they expect their unions to fix the problem. At the same time, while the teacher unions continue to be major political players through their lobbying and electoral activities, they are less influential than in the past and they can gain little for their members if they appear to oppose the dominant policy idea of test-based accountability. This tension between their role as a membership organization and as a lobby group needing to obtain resources from the external environment has led to teacher unions relying on a range of political strategies that may seem at odds. For example, both the AFT and the NEA objected to the emphasis on performance-based teacher compensation and charter schools highlighted in the Race to the Top application criteria, and in several states, union affiliates refused to support the state’s Race to the Top application (McNeil, 2010). However, in parallel with this oppositional stance, Randi Weingarten has recognized that the education status quo is changing and that the interests of unionized teachers are better protected if they participate in reform discussions and adapt to changed circumstances rather than oppose a movement they cannot stop. She used this reasoning in her support of a Colorado law and her active participation in collective bargaining negotiations in Washington, DC where the result in both cases has been policies linking teacher job security more directly to classroom performance. This dual strategy of working to curb policies not in their members’ interest, while also accommodating new policy directions and persuading members to redefine their interest, is an example of policy feedback that has evolved over several decades. In a notable earlier example, Albert Shanker, one of Weingarten’s predecessors, used a similar strategy in response to *A Nation at Risk* initiatives and the advent of voucher legislation by agreeing to policies not in his members’ immediate interest as a way of shaping those policies and forestalling more radical ones.

## *Realigned Interests*

Shifts in how equity is defined and achieved, and in who bears the costs of accountability policies have led to realignments of interest group coalitions. Some civil rights groups and advocates for students living in poverty, such as the Education Trust, the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights, and the National Council of La Raza, support test-based accountability (and particularly NCLB) because in their view it currently seems to be the most effective way to force schools to address the achievement gap. In contrast, groups such as the NAACP, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the National Association for Bilingual Education, have called for shifting NCLB's emphasis and that of other testing and accountability policies from sanctioning schools to holding the federal government, states, and local communities accountable for providing the resources needed to improve student learning and to basing evaluations of school performance on achievement measures beyond simple multiple choice tests (Forum on Educational Accountability, 2007).

Another example of realigned interests is the split in the Democratic Party, which stems largely from different views about charter schools on the part of the national teacher unions and groups such as Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), a political action committee that supports the expansion of charter schools. However, DFER, along with other groups such as StudentsFirst and Stand for Students, have also espoused differential pay for teachers, with some allies accusing the teacher unions of putting their members' interests ahead of the educational needs of students (Hoff & McNeil, 2008). The link to educational accountability is partly a rhetorical one. "Bad news" about school performance has been one of the major rationales for proposing alternative institutional arrangements such as charter schools and redesigned teacher compensation systems.

## *Interpretative Effects and The "Politics of Bad News"*

Mandates to reconstitute schools that fail to improve are the most notable example of "bad news," and might be expected to produce interpretative effects. Survey data on this issue are limited, but do suggest that by a solid margin, the public favors providing external support to such schools as compared with solutions that require a major redesign. In the 2010 Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll, 54% of respondents favored keeping poorly performing schools open with the same principal and teachers, and providing comprehensive outside support. In contrast, 41% favored more drastic solutions:

closing the school and reopening it with a new principal (17%), reopening it as a charter school (13%), or closing the school and sending the students to other higher performing schools (11%) (Bushaw & Lopez, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

Although they are still in their infancy, parent trigger laws that have recently been enacted in a few states may eventually represent a significant political response to bad news. These laws allow parents to vote to convert chronically underperforming schools to charters or to restructure them in other ways. Only four states have enacted such laws, but they are under consideration in about a dozen more (Cavanagh, 2012). The first two attempts to invoke California's parent trigger law have ended up in the courts, and these laws remain controversial because of the potential involvement of charter school advocates and operators in urging parents to press for reconstituting schools.

Like the split within the Democratic Party, parent trigger laws divide groups claiming to be speaking on behalf of parents, with traditional parent-teacher associations (PTAs) allying with school boards in opposing them and newer organizations such as StudentsFirst and Parent Revolution promoting them.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that policy feedback has emerged from groups representing parents, it has resulted from the intersection of accountability policies, school choice options, and the focus on institutional redesign in federal and state initiatives such as Race to the Top and turnaround schools. At this point, mobilization is limited and considerably less than it is for organized teachers. Nevertheless, parent trigger laws and similar mechanisms provide the enabling conditions for greater mobilization and a realignment of interests if policy entrepreneurs choose to use them.

### *Effects on Governance Capacity*

Changes in institutional rules and structures create incentives for different interests to mobilize, but they can also alter the capacity of the system to govern itself. The institutions resulting from standards and accountability policies have become more complex, with a variety of organizational arrangements having emerged to provide professional development, technical assistance, testing, and instructional materials. However, this complexity has not been accompanied by any significant changes in governance structures and capacities, especially at the local level. As a result, part-time elected school board members are expected to ensure that this more complex system is fiscally and educationally accountable and to mediate among a denser network of often competing interests. The combination of expanded policy scope, more complex delivery systems, and low-capacity governance is the latest manifestation of "the collision between rapidly expanded policy-making and fragmented

governance” (Cohen & Spillane, 1992, p. 11) that characterizes U.S. public education. Recent accountability policies have expanded centralized direction from the federal and state governments but have also pushed the responsibility and costs of implementation to local districts, including requirements to reorganize substantial numbers of schools failing to meet student performance targets (Maxwell, 2009). Consequently, local governance has become more reactive politically, and operationally more dependent on outside providers. The result has been what Meyer (1979) calls “fragmented centralization,” seemingly centralizing policies producing highly variable programmatic responses from multiple decision-making arenas characterized by low political will and capacity.

### **Policy Feedback Leads to New Policy: The Common Core**

Accountability policies have led to altered political dynamics. To the extent that the resulting feedback has influenced policy, it has largely reinforced, expanded, and institutionalized the assessment-driven standards and accountability policy monopoly of the past three decades. However, by 2006, proponents recognized that while accountability policies were well-entrenched, they had produced unintended consequences and needed adjustment. The press to take some kind of action grew stronger as problems with NCLB became more evident and its timely reauthorization less likely. Although it is not the only example of policy feedback shaping new standards and accountability policy, the Common Core State Standards movement is potentially the most significant effort to redefine and strengthen the broader policy regime. Its progression, from an idea promoted by a group of policy entrepreneurs to policy adopted by 46 states, highlights several aspects of the political dynamics that have characterized accountability policy. These include the role of new actors in the educational policy arena, efforts to address the negative consequences of fragmented centralization, and a strategy to preserve standards-based policy in the face of the politics of bad news and negative policy feedback. Consequently, the Common Core represents the most comprehensive example of how accountability policy has produced new political dynamics which, in turn, have generated a major change within the broader accountability policy regime.

During the G. H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations, there were several unsuccessful attempts to promote national K-12 content standards as an alternative to standards unique to each state.<sup>4</sup> However, in 2006, two former governors, James B. Hunt, Jr. of North Carolina and Bob Wise of West Virginia,

decided that what had seemed impossible 10 years earlier was now possible, and they became the policy entrepreneurs most responsible for persuading key decision makers and constituent organizations to support the idea of national (subsequently renamed common) standards (Rothman, 2011). Three aspects of efforts to promote and implement standards common to multiple states stem directly from accountability policy feedback.

First, Hunt and Wise were aided by several of the new players who had entered the education policy arena to widen the goals of accountability policy and the use of student test scores. These included think tanks on the left and right of the political spectrum, such as the Center for American Progress and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation; groups such as the Alliance for Excellent Education, headed by Governor Wise, and the Education Trust; and foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Foundation (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009).<sup>5</sup> However, unlike NCLB, CCSS has not divided these newer groups and those representing the education establishment. When the CCSS were ready to be developed, the entrepreneurs who had promoted them turned the task over to the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). These organizations reached out to the AFT and the NEA, and teams of teachers from each union provided feedback on successive drafts as they were prepared by professional mathematics and English language arts (ELA) standards writers. In effect, CCSS development diverted the policy discourse away from the divisive aspects of standards-based accountability to a task where groups could work together. Similarly, by asserting that standards development would be “research and evidence-based” and a state-led effort, NGA and CCSSO sought to avoid the “curriculum wars” that had produced the most serious interpretative effects from standards and assessment policy during the 1990s and blunt opposition that had stalled earlier attempts at national standards.

A second aspect of policy feedback relates to how the problem was framed. Consistent with earlier standards and accountability policy, the need to prepare students for a global economy was a primary rationale for the Common Core (National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, & Achieve, 2008). However, an equally prominent reason focused on the effects of fragmented centralization. Promoters of the Common Core drew heavily on research by Andrew Porter and others showing the significant variability in content and performance standards across states (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007; National Research Council, 2008). NCLB mandated that states establish content standards and test all students in Grades 3 to 8 annually on their progress in mastering those standards. However, federalism allowed this centralized directive to be implemented in highly variable ways,

and the incentive system created by NCLB's "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) targets pushed many states toward low performance standards. For example, a widely cited NCES study mapped state proficiency standards in mathematics and reading for Grades 4 and 8 onto the appropriate National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale and found that state differences in the percentage of students scoring at the proficient level on state assessments was related to where a state set its proficiency levels and not to real differences in achievement as measured by NAEP. Furthermore, most state cut-points fell below the equivalent of the NAEP *proficient* standard, and some even fell below the cut-point corresponding to the NAEP *basic* standard (NCES, 2007). As Governor Hunt (2009) argued, the Common Core was a way to ensure that "geography should not represent academic destiny."

A third aspect of policy feedback reflected in the Common Core responds to the "politics of bad news." Accountability bad news has been primarily about student performance—low achievement as compared with students in countries competing with the United States economically; the persistence of an achievement gap separating students by race, ethnicity, and social class; and the growing proportion of schools failing to meet AYP targets. Continuing bad news of this sort has delegitimized NCLB, and precluded reauthorization in the legislation's current form. The Obama administration's use of waivers to help avoid adverse political consequences for public education when large numbers of schools fail to meet proficiency standards for all their students by 2014 is only a temporary expedient until the current political stalemate can be overcome and Congress enacts a successor to NCLB. At the same time, such news has posed less of a threat to well-established accountability regimes within individual states, and they are likely to continue regardless of how and when the federal policy is altered. The core policy elements—standardized assessments with consequences attached to test results—are well established. Test-based accountability has become path dependent with institutional arrangements deeply embedded in states and local school districts (McDonnell, 2008).

For Common Core advocates, negative feedback about student performance was part of their case in arguing for "fewer, clearer, and higher" mathematics and ELA standards. However, there was another interpretation of the evidence about bad news and its causes. Although Common Core proponents attributed the problem to variable and low quality standards, other researchers—especially those who study policy implementation—concluded that it was due to a lack of system capacity, especially supports for teachers and students (Cohen & Moffitt, 2009). They argued that the shortcomings documented in statistics and research findings are less the result of low quality and variable standards than how policies have been implemented. Rather than the tight

linkages among curriculum and instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments assumed in the standards-based accountability ideal, the assessment portion had come to dominate and many schools lacked the financial capacity to bring all students to proficiency (Goertz, 2007; Ravitch, 2010). In effect, researchers argued that one cause of the bad news was policy makers' underinvestment in the enabling conditions necessary for standards policies to work as envisioned.

Common Core advocates understood that such instructional supports were necessary. Nevertheless, they chose to downplay them as they promoted the policy idea. Focusing on enabling conditions would complicate the agenda at a time when a policy window was opening that might not stay open for long. So rather than propose a comprehensive policy addressing the range of shortcomings evident in NCLB and state accountability policies—including underinvestment in system capacity—Common Core advocates concentrated on remedying variability in state standards. Effective policy entrepreneurs often take advantage of opportunities to get their proposals enacted even if they do not fully address the relevant policy problem. However, partial solutions can undercut the push for more comprehensive approaches because there is always the risk that such solutions will undermine mobilization in favor of broader approaches. Elected officials can argue that something was done and move on to other issues, thus creating a type of feedback that may limit future policy making (Campbell, 2011).

Once the standards were developed and adopted, however, CCSS proponents recognized that sizable investments in instructional supports would be necessary if they were to maintain educators' buy-in and implement the Common Core effectively. It is too early to tell whether the long-term impact of bad news will be systematic and widespread efforts to improve practice and reinforce implementing institutions. However, CCSS supporters, such as the Gates Foundation, seem to recognize that without such investments, this latest incarnation of standards-based accountability risks negative feedback and a weakening of the larger policy regime. Consequently, between 2009 and 2011, the Gates Foundation invested US\$76 million in designing instructional tools for teachers to use in implementing the mathematics and ELA standards, and in assisting state agencies and local districts in their CCSS efforts (Phillips & Wong, 2012). A number of organizations, supported by Gates and other foundations, are part of what Rowan (2002) calls the "school improvement industry," and for-profit and nonprofit providers will be an integral part of CCSS implementation in states and local districts. Consequently, these organizations are likely to play an increasingly prominent role in whatever policy feedback the Common Core generates.

## Conclusions

Because of a history extending back over three decades and across multiple states and school districts, elements of a new politics emerged incrementally in response to accountability policy. Despite its slow development, there is no question that this policy regime has generated feedback and that it has become more evident since the advent of NCLB. The two major ideas, dominating education policy during this period, have been standards-based accountability and school choice, with the emergence of new interests and the realignment of traditional groups occurring in response to their intersection. Organizations, such as the NEA and AFT that have opposed the expansion of test-based accountability have done so not only because their members are bearing a significant portion of the policy costs but also because assessment results are used as a rationale for expanding school choice. In contrast, civil rights and parental advocacy groups pressing for trigger laws and similar choice options are using accountability-related information to frame a “politics of bad news.” That bad news depicts a system characterized by centralized directives, but with insufficient coherence or capacity to meet those mandates. Hence the institutional structures and rules that define accountability policy have created incentives for both traditional and new interests to mobilize. At the same time, they have prompted the entrance of a host of new nonprofit and for-profit providers into a system whose governance arrangements are ill-equipped to manage them effectively.

Educational accountability’s current policy feedback has implications going forward for research and policy. This article has largely focused on the institutional dimensions of policy feedback and has said little about individual-level interpretive effects. That is because we lack systematic data about the effects of accountability policies on public attitudes toward the schools; on how parents, educators, and the public define their responsibility to public education; and on the relationship between information about school performance and trust in government more broadly.<sup>6</sup> Developing a more nuanced and rigorous understanding of the interpretive effects of accountability and other education policies represents more than a worthwhile research endeavor. Asking about the perceptual messages conveyed in major education policies, such as standards and accountability, is particularly important because a majority of voters do not have school-age children and lack firsthand information about even the schools in their own communities. So such information has direct relevance in gauging public support for public schools.

The Common Core illustrates how policy feedback can shape future policy and do so in ways that not only preserve the basic policy monopoly but

also alter it significantly. At least for the foreseeable future, the CCSS have preserved standards-based accountability while also fundamentally changing the concept of content standards unique to each state. The Common Core will generate its own, as yet unknown, policy feedback. So an obvious question is to what extent will its resulting political dynamics reflect earlier policy feedback or will they differ? For example, will the consensus among national organizations working on implementing the Common Core hold, or will divisions emerge once assessments based on the CCSS are online and generating data that can be used to reward and sanction schools and educators? Will “bad news” lead to greater investments in instructional capacity, or will it result in a dismantling of the CCSS? Can the Common Core mitigate the negative effects of centrally articulated goals without equal attention to a reconstituted governance system? However those questions are answered over the next decade, one conclusion is already certain: the fate of future accountability policy will depend on political responses to the incentives and institutional arrangements the Common Core creates.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author received financial support from the William T. Grant Foundation for research presented in this article.

### **Notes**

1. This article builds and elaborates on McDonnell (2009).
2. There is considerably more data on public attitudes toward different forms of test-based accountability. Although attitudes have become less positive since the advent of NCLB and survey responses acknowledge the limits of standardized testing, the public continues to support the high stakes use of tests such as those to determine whether students graduate from high school. (For a summary of public attitudes toward test-based accountability, see McDonnell, 2008).
3. The groups originally pressing for parent trigger laws were liberal, progressive ones. However, more recently, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative, limited-government organization, has provided legislators in a number of states with model legislation for a parent trigger law (Ujifusa, 2012).

4. For a summary of unsuccessful efforts to promote national standards during the 1990s, see Rothman (2011, pp. 29-52).
5. The remainder of the discussion of the CCSS is based on interviews conducted as part of an ongoing project examining the use of research and other types of evidence in the Common Core movement, funded by the William T. Grant Foundation. Over the past year, 90 interviews have been conducted with leaders of the Common Core and their supporters, members of the work groups and committees charged with writing and validating the CCSS, national and state education policy makers, researchers, and groups critical of the CCSS.
6. For an example of a study measuring the interpretive effects of a range of domestic policies, see Mettler and Koch (2012).

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