

Research Finds the False Assumption

of Accountability

By **Dr. Elizabeth R. Stebbins** and **Dr. Patricia A. Fine**
Public Policy and Management

The research shows that the false assumption of accountability is a common one. It is the belief that individuals are responsible for their actions and that they should be held accountable for those actions. This assumption is often used to justify punishment and to encourage better behavior. However, research has shown that this assumption is often false. Many people are not responsible for their actions, and many people are not held accountable for those actions. This research shows that the false assumption of accountability is a common one, and it is often used to justify punishment and to encourage better behavior.

When we think about accountability, we often think about individuals. We think about how individuals are responsible for their actions and how they should be held accountable for those actions. This is the false assumption of accountability. It is the belief that individuals are responsible for their actions and that they should be held accountable for those actions. This assumption is often used to justify punishment and to encourage better behavior. However, research has shown that this assumption is often false. Many people are not responsible for their actions, and many people are not held accountable for those actions. This research shows that the false assumption of accountability is a common one, and it is often used to justify punishment and to encourage better behavior.

The research shows that the false assumption of accountability is a common one. It is the belief that individuals are responsible for their actions and that they should be held accountable for those actions. This assumption is often used to justify punishment and to encourage better behavior. However, research has shown that this assumption is often false. Many people are not responsible for their actions, and many people are not held accountable for those actions. This research shows that the false assumption of accountability is a common one, and it is often used to justify punishment and to encourage better behavior.

the worst sanction—withholding school aid—was only rarely applied, on the ground that students would suffer the most.

Researchers associated with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) have examined these emerging accountability systems in a number of ways. CPRE did interviews and large-scale surveys of teachers and principals in two research sites using new accountability systems: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, in North Carolina, and the state of Kentucky.

We studied the internal accountability systems in 20 public, charter, and independent schools and then followed up in three high schools in each of four states with very different accountability approaches. In a number of cities, we looked at school reconstitution, one of the most severe sanctions applied to failing schools. In eight states, we examined how federal, state, and district accountability interacted and how schools were affected by the various systems. We also surveyed all 50 states and profiled their policies on assessment, performance reporting, accountability, and alignment between their Title I and general systems of accountability. Our research yielded a

content, sometimes to the point that drill crosses over into overt "test preparation." In those cases, it appears that the content is being learned only in the context of a specific test, without broader application.

However, CPRE work in 10 states suggests that, while narrowing does occur, so do other types of responses. In Kentucky, the accountability system is credited with expanding the content taught to include writing and the humanities. We have seen elementary principals and teachers who are active reformers, as shown by rich examples of student work and many innovative pedagogies.

We have also observed high school teachers embracing reform. The teachers in one New York high school accepted the "Regents exams for all" policy enthusiastically. They took personal responsibility for student progress, used data to improve instruction, added instructional time, and increased professional development. In a Vermont high school, teachers were shocked at low test scores and used state-mandated "action planning" to set ambitious data-driven goals and to emphasize open-ended mathematics questions, to change the algebra sequence, and to broaden the literature curriculum.

3. Internal accountability precedes external accountability. A school's ability to respond to any form of external performance-based accountability is determined by the degree to which individuals share common values and understandings about such matters as what they expect of students academically, what constitutes good instructional practice, who is responsible for student learning, and how individual students and teachers account for their work and learning.

In many schools, individual teachers' conceptions of their own responsibility have the greatest influence over how schools address accountability issues. The big questions—Accountability to whom? For what? And how?—are answered by the accretion of the decisions of individual teachers, which are based on their own views about their capacity and that of their students, rather than by collective deliberation or explicit management decisions.

Teachers' judgments are powerfully influenced by preconceptions about the individual traits of students and about the characteristics of families and communities. And they are typically uninformed by systematic knowledge of what students might be capable of learning under different conditions of teaching.

Teachers and principals in such schools often deal with the demands of formal external accountability either by incorporating them in superficial ways—claiming, for example, that the new de-

mands are consistent with existing practice when they clearly are not—or by rejecting them as “unrealistic” for their students.

For example, schools operating under such severe sanctions as reconstitution and probation in San Francisco and Chicago do not appear to be making fundamental changes in their core processes, instead seeming to place considerable emphasis on test preparation. Some of these schools may incorporate structural changes (e.g., breaking up into smaller schools), but few appear to be making extensive or deep efforts to rethink their instructional programs.

Accountability for performance requires changes in schools' internal capacities for i

tricts and schools to develop day-to-day curricula linked to standards.

Of 22 districts in eight states CPRE studied over the last five years, a number were developing their own evaluation expertise to help schools use performance data. Several were developing new, more intensive approaches to professional development and providing school-based support for teacher learning. Some were exerting substantially more control over curriculum than in the past, providing more guidance and materials to schools. This was especially true in mathematics, perhaps because the districts assumed such guidance was less necessary in reading. And many districts were providing targeted support and additional resources to low-performing schools.

However, not all study sites undertook capacity-building efforts, and, given the scope of the problem, many approaches were insufficient in size or strategic power. Much greater investment is required, and much more thought about designing and supporting intelligent ways to build schools' capacity for improvement is needed.

6. Stakes matter, but we need to know more about how they matter. Students, teachers, administrators, schools, and school systems respond to the full range of stakes or consequences embedded in performance-based accountability systems—from publicizing test scores, through identifying students and schools for remediation, to denial of graduation and school takeovers. But responses are not always what policy makers hoped for.

Moreover, different types of schools respond differently to the same stakes. For example, low-capacity, low-performing schools often do not respond to student- and school-level consequences by improving their internal accountability and capacity for instruction. Instead, they often respond by doing the same things they were doing, only doing them harder. And high-capacity, high-performing schools often respond to the stakes of an accountability system—even to such low-level stakes as publicity—more quickly and imaginatively than lower-capacity, lower-performing schools.

Furthermore, the distribution of rewards and sanctions within a given accountability system often raises unanticipated problems in schools' responses. For example, teachers often say they don't have the capacity or responsibility for student learning in systems where consequences of accountability fall on students but not on schools.

Like wise, teachers often say they have little leverage over students in systems where consequences fall mainly on schools but not on students. Even systems with rewards and sanctions for both students and schools attach relatively heavy stakes to individual student performance and relatively light stakes to school performance. Students can

fail to graduate by failing a test; schools and the individual adults who work in them can be identified as “failing,” but this carries a remote threat of closure or some form of assistance in the short run.

CPRE surveyed teachers in eight states that vary in where rewards and sanctions are applied (to schools or students or both) and in the importance of the stakes in their accountability systems. In all of them, teachers believed “schools” were held more accountable by states for student performance than they themselves were. In general, the same was true of their view of accountability for local districts; schools may be in the line of fire, but they are less direct targets than districts.

In contrast, principals were seen as holding teachers accountable for student performance but not quite as strictly as they held teachers accountable for their teaching. Teachers gave their colleagues the lowest ratings. Teachers do not think their fellow teachers hold them accountable for student performance or for their teaching—evidence of the absence of internal accountability.

So, while we can see the effects of rewards and sanctions in the implementation of performance-based accountability systems, the policies themselves are not designed to account for the complex reactions that occur in schools and school systems.

7. The expectations underlying performance-based accountability systems are often unclear to the public, to students, to schools, and to school systems. In many schools and communities, the purposes and expectations behind these