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An Accountability Lesson From Michelle Obama

By Douglas B. Reeves & Timothy Water

For almost a decade, the complex enterprise of education has been reduced to box scores. Good schools have high scores; bad schools have low scores. Contrast this superficiality to Michelle Obama's admirable efforts to combat childhood obesity.

If the first lady had suggested that every American child undergo an annual "weigh-in" and then publicly report the results, shaming and humiliating those whose weights were far off the mark, her policy prescriptions would have been ridiculed as a counterproductive waste of time. Wisely, Mrs. Obama counsels a more nuanced approach, including healthy food, accessible exercise, and frequent monitoring of health indicators. One of her first symbolic acts in promoting such an agenda was to have schoolchildren help plant a vegetable garden at the White House.

State and federal policymakers should, we suggest, visit the White House garden and ponder the implications for a new definition of educational accountability.

First, we should change the accountability equation. The prevailing claim that "testing = learning" is as superficial as the formula that "health = weight." Overweight students can lose weight either by healthy eating and exercise or by developing eating disorders and ingesting amphetamines. If the only goal is weight loss, then the way it's accomplished doesn't matter.

If we want to avoid the educational equivalent of anorexia and pill-popping—teaching focused only on test content and test-taking strategy—then the accountability equation must include causes, not merely effects. We would measure students' progress frequently, not just once a year, and we would monitor not only their results, but how they achieved them. The accountability equation should be "learning = teaching + leadership." And an effective accountability system would measure all three elements of that equation.

Second, change the incentives. If you gave the people in charge of the student weight-management system billions of dollars when students lost a certain number of pounds, students would lose weight. It wouldn't be healthy or sustainable, but with billions of dollars at stake, there would be some very fancy scales used able to persuade everyone involved that the students had been successful.

More-appropriate incentives would consider how the objectives were achieved. There is no scarcity of research on effective change leadership and teaching effectiveness. What is missing is a national

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commitment for incentives that focus on appropriate adult behavior rather than manipulation of children.

Third, make educational accountability a public-health and safety issue. America was successful in nearly eradicating polio not because students found immunizations (or even the later foul-tasting sugar cubes) appealing. We stopped the dread disease because it was our collective duty to do so. If my neighbor's children were not immunized, my own children were at risk, and vice versa. In the smaller world of the 21st century, the illiteracy of my neighbor's children, whether my neighbor is in Mississippi, California, or New York, also puts my children at risk.

Fourth, make educational systems "high-reliability organizations." Research from fields as diverse as aviation and medicine shows that monitoring, real-time feedback, and making midcourse corrections are essential for sustained high performance. Pilots and patients who make decisions only on the basis of annual feedback are quite likely to die. Mistakes left uncorrected can be fatal, in navigation or in nutrition. High-reliability organizations have clarity of process and purpose. Results are important, but leaders of these organizations sustain those results because everyone in their organization understands the processes behind the results.

Fifth, put integrity at the heart of educational accountability. Systems with integrity give leaders an incentive to say, "I made a mistake, and this is what I learned from it." Accountability systems based on test scores alone provide only incentives to bury errors, rather than learn from them. Worse yet, prevailing systems give leaders every incentive to ignore pernicious behavior as long as it produces results.

Educational accountability policy is at a crossroads. The nation is now poised to pursue a policy of educational anorexia, choosing the path of the fastest results for the least effort and the greatest economic rewards. We can, instead, learn a few lessons from the White House garden, choosing a path that is thoughtful, deliberate, challenging, and sustainable.

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