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## Commentary / Needed: An Updated Accountability Model

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**We won't get the results we need until we treat teachers as true professionals.**

If you're in charge and someone who works for you isn't doing the job you hired them to do, you hold them accountable. If you point out that they're not delivering and they still don't buckle down, you get someone who *will* do the job. Simple, right?

It must have seemed that simple to the framers of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. They were angry people, both Republicans and Democrats. For years, leaders of both parties had poured more and more money into federal programs for disadvantaged students, at a rate greatly exceeding the increases in inflation; yet the improvements in reading performance, for the student population as a whole and for disadvantaged students in particular, had been modest or flat. It appeared that the money had gone down a rat hole, and Congress was ready to hold schools accountable. Under NCLB, the money for school improvement would still flow, but if the students were not on track to reach full proficiency by 2014, schools could be closed, principals could be replaced, and teachers could be fired. It was time, Congress thought, to get tough.

Accountability became the nation's top school improvement strategy. When NCLB was passed, that accountability fell on the school. When the Obama administration implemented Race to the Top in 2009, that target shifted; now teachers would be held accountable on the basis of their students' scores on standardized tests of basic skills.

NCLB marked a sea change in the relationship between government and education in the United States. Up to that point, it had been clear that the states were in charge of education policy, with the federal government providing aid to the states. Now the federal government was in the driver's seat, and it was determined to make sure that it got value for its money.

It hasn't worked out very well. After 10 years of test-based accountability, test scores are still flat. There's no indication that the performance of disadvantaged students is improving (Jennings, 2013); one nation after another is surpassing the United States in the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) rankings of student performance; and we're still among the handful of nations with the highest cost per student in elementary and secondary education in the world (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013).

It would be bad enough if this strategy just hadn't worked. But it's worse than that. Good teachers are leaving our schools in droves, citing test-based accountability as a principal cause (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). Applications to schools of education are plummeting (Sawchuk, 2014), in part for the same reason. One can reasonably argue that test-based accountability not only has failed to make things better, but has actually made things much worse.

### An Obsolete Model

I believe the problem is not the idea of accountability per se, but rather the model of accountability we are using. That model is

grounded in a theory of industrial management that may have made sense a century ago, but no longer makes any sense at all.

Factory work in the early decades of the 20th century was dirty, dangerous, exhausting, and often just plain boring. Few jobs required much skill or craftsmanship. To meet the needs of the industrial economy, schools were only expected to educate their students to basic literacy standards. School districts hired superintendents to manage schools in the same way that much-admired industrialists managed their companies. There was no reason to go to the expense of educating teachers to university standards; the assumption was that quantity was much more important than quality and that docile and cheap teachers, told what to do by management, would be able to do the job.

Following World War II, the common schools became less common. As the suburbs developed, far more was invested in the sons and daughters of the wealthy, who got excellent teachers and the best facilities and were expected to go on to fill the professions and run government and private enterprise. The kids in working-class communities got the basic skills, which was enough to give them a ticket to the growing middle class. Although the sons and daughters of former American slaves, American Indians, and others were largely denied access to decent schools, the system as a whole was very efficient, producing a remarkably successful country for the majority of its citizens.

By the 1970s, however, events in the global economy would render the cheap-teacher model obsolete. Employers the world over were discovering that they could produce goods and services wherever they could get the least-expensive workers at the skill level needed to do the work. Global labor markets developed. At the same time, advances in technology were making it possible to automate the routine jobs that had provided employment to millions of Americans a century ago—the very jobs the education system had been designed around.

The result has been a disaster for working Americans who bring only basic literacy to the labor force. The skills they offer often make them unemployable or only employable at poverty wages. As a result, the mass education system, which was designed to produce graduates with only those skills, is obsolete. We now need a system that can produce far better-educated graduates, people whose work cannot be automated or shipped overseas. For the first time in the history of the United States, the future depends on educating *all* children to standards previously reserved for only a select few.

That goal simply cannot be met with the cheap-teacher industrial model. It can only be accomplished by highly trained teachers who are trusted to exercise their judgment and who are treated as true professionals. And this new model is precisely what the world's top-performing education systems have adopted.

## A Little Theory

What does all this history have to do with accountability? Everything. It's all about assumptions.

A century ago, few jobs were intrinsically rewarding. Most managers, not unreasonably, assumed that workers would slow down and shirk their responsibilities unless employers held them strictly accountable for the number of hours they worked and the number of widgets they produced. Workers, these managers assumed, would need close supervision and strong extrinsic incentives to perform.

In 1960, Douglas McGregor, an MIT professor, called that assumption "Theory X." He posited that managers could make a different assumption—that workers are ambitious, are willing to work hard, want to take pride in their work, and with some encouragement can be very creative. McGregor thought the managers he was training would get a lot more out of their workers if they embraced this assumption, which he called "Theory Y."

Almost a decade later, in *The Age of Discontinuity*, Peter Drucker (1969) said that the future belonged to countries that hired *knowledge workers* to do *knowledge work*. Unlike blue-collar workers, who expected a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, knowledge workers expected an extraordinary day's pay for an extraordinary day's work. Instead of needing to be closely supervised, knowledge workers applied a wealth of knowledge and skill to solve unique problems.

Recently, in *Drive*, Daniel Pink (2011) pulled together the literature that stands on the shoulders of Drucker's iconic book. The old carrot-and-stick methods that industrial engineers developed a century ago, he said, don't work anymore. Today's highly educated, professional workers need to be able to find meaning in their work, autonomy on the job, and the opportunity to continually develop new skills and conquer new challenges. They're capable of great things, but only if they're treated as professionals.

## From Theory to School Practice

In the field of public education, implementing Theory Y would require a whole new approach to the teaching profession. We'll need to attract the most high-performing high school graduates into teaching. For that to happen, we'll need to make teaching a high-status profession. Colleges of education will need to be a lot harder to get into, teachers will need to have deep understanding of the subjects they teach, and they will have to spend a lot of time mastering their craft under the tutelage of master teachers. The standards for student performance will have to go way beyond basic skills, and the tests we use to

measure the acquisition of those skills will have to capture a far wider range of student performance than the cheap, computer-scored, multiple-choice tests we have used for a long time.

In addition to these necessary changes, we need to transform the way we manage our schools. The essential ingredient of the new model of accountability is career ladders leading to the position of master teacher, a position that pays as much as school principal. For the first time, this would make it possible for teachers to have a real career in teaching and to earn the kind of recognition, status, pay, authority, and responsibility that members of all the high-status professions get if they make the enormous effort to stay at the top of their game throughout their professional lifetime.

When advancement depends on increasing professional competence rather than time on the job, when the job a teacher has on the last day in the classroom is no longer the same job that teacher had on his or her first day in the classroom, when people know that the person who leads other teachers in their work in the school not only received a rigorous university education but also worked to get better and better at his or her craft, when a beginning teacher's pay is comparable to a beginning engineer's and goes up only as a teacher goes up the career ladder—then, and only then, will we be able to attract to our schools large numbers of young employees that Google would have been proud to recruit. The top-performing countries do this at a fraction of our cost (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013).

The way a school implements career ladders matters. Most of the top-performing nations have teacher-pupil ratios comparable to ours, but they have larger class sizes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). Teachers spend about a quarter of their time working collaboratively with one another, rather than facing students in the classroom. In the best of these systems, all teachers, except those at the top of the career ladder, have mentors.

In many countries—among them Japan, mainland China, Hong Kong, and Singapore—teachers meet frequently, often weekly, by grade and by subject taught. Teachers in the upper ranks of the career ladder put teams of teachers together and lead them. These teams analyze the data on student performance, figure out what's working and what's not, determine what priorities they want to work on, do extensive research about the issue, develop new units of curriculum or new approaches to instruction on the basis of the research, and build prototypes of the new approaches.

Master teachers demonstrate the new lesson or teaching technique while other teachers critique them, and then they all go back to work to perfect it until they get it right. They repeat the same process, over and over again, in other areas where the data suggest they could improve. They are continually in one another's classrooms, taking notes and talking with one another about what they've seen (Tucker, 2011; 2014a).

This model provides the structured feedback—not from mentors alone, but from many colleagues, all the time—that is essential to becoming an expert in any field (Tucker, 2014b). Everyone knows who is a spectacular teacher, who is getting better, who is trying but is not likely to improve, and who has given up. The spectacular teachers and those who are getting steadily better go up the career ladder, and the ones at the bottom feel compelled to leave.

Being a good teacher is essential to progress up the ladder, but it's not enough. One also has to show that one is a good mentor and leader of others. Slackers don't survive in this environment. That outcome is not decreed and enforced by school administrators or by policymakers—it's the result of a professional culture in which every professional is accountable to the other professionals.

## A Different Kind of Accountability

The United States has been trying to squeeze blood out of a turnip. It has been unable to improve its schools, despite enormous increases in spending, because it has failed to recognize that the management model it adopted 100 years ago to meet the education needs of a burgeoning industrial society has exhausted its usefulness. This model cannot produce the results we now require, no matter how much money we throw at it. We need another model of schooling with its own form of accountability—one that can get the best out of true professionals.

The model I have just described is a professional development system, an accountability system, and a continual improvement system. It is a professional development system embedded in the way the school is organized and does its work. It is a model of how accountability works in a professional, not a blue-collar, work environment. It is spectacularly successful at improving both professional competence and student performance. What is the biggest difference between this system and test-based accountability? This system works.

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