

# Balance trust and accountability

**Education reformers want more accountability even though the evidence suggests better outcomes result from fewer rules.**



“Trust but verify,” Ronald Reagan famously said about nuclear arms reduction proposals in the 1980s. Exactly this same dilemma is at the forefront of education policy debates today around the world as education systems struggle to balance trust and regulation. How much do school systems need to be controlled by rules, and how much can we trust the judgment of those working in the system?

These two contrasting approaches were the subject of discussion at a recent meeting in Jerusalem of representatives from 17 countries, sponsored by the Van Leer Institute and several other Israeli organizations. Each country brought a team of three — a teacher, a principal, and a government leader. The theme of the meeting was “Trust and Regulation” as understood and experienced by people in these different roles.

In practice, as was clear from the discussions at this event, every education system has a mix of trust and regulation. Of necessity, some things must be regulated — the school year and day, and graduation requirements, for example — but everything about school can’t possibly be regulated. Still, the situations in these countries — mostly European but also Canadian, American, and Japanese — are very different. Some see their systems as heavily based on trust, with relatively little regulation. That would be the case in Finland, but also in most Asian countries. In other countries, extensive regulation suggests a climate of distrust, leaving educators feeling

beleaguered and unmotivated.

These two ideas about human nature are not new: Some 60 years ago, Douglas McGregor wrote about them as Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X holds that people can’t be trusted; that, unless they’re watched closely, they’ll take advantage of any situation for their own benefit. Policy and management therefore must develop incentives, accountability measures, and penalties to prevent misbehavior. This view underlies quite a few recent policy efforts in education — for example, increased inspection, testing, or evaluation linked to various consequences, whether for students, teachers, or schools. It’s also behind more traditional centralized approaches, including systems that believe every school should be doing the same things in the same way at the same time.

A second position, Theory Y, starts with the assumption that most people know what they are doing and are reasonably well intentioned, at least most of the time. In this view, organizations benefit by putting more trust in people to do their jobs and building organization cultures that encourage such an attitude. Proponents of this position tend to opt for fewer rules and weaker accountability measures. Proposals for greater autonomy for individual schools are one instance of this attitude, as is the position of many teacher organizations that individual teachers should determine their own practice.

Unsurprisingly, those outside the system tend to favor policies with more regulation, while insiders tend to favor more trust.

Most of us think we’re trustworthy while others are often, in our view, less reliable, and so they need more controls. As one wag put it, it’s human nature to want more autonomy for ourselves and more predictability — and therefore less autonomy — from everyone else. So, in the same way, teachers may want more autonomy in their work, but they often want more rules for students; the same is true of principals with teachers, and policy makers with schools. The double standard is alive and well!

## More regulation

The pressure for increased regulation is not confined to education; the same dynamic is at work in other fields. It’s evident in nurses who feel they spend more time documenting than caring for patients, or government agencies that must check and recheck even the smallest expenditure or have highly restrictive procedures for hiring or procurement. And the private sector also complains about increased requirements related to health and safety, audits, or antidiscrimination.

In most cases, as these examples imply, regulations have reasons behind them. The danger of being sued for wrongdoing certainly encourages more adherence to rules and careful record keeping. In many other cases, rules arise from perceived abuses of trust, many of which make good media stories. When there is public outrage about some particular breach, new regulations are often the result. For example, only a very few cases of child abuse are necessary to generate a require-

**As is so often the case, good education policy mirrors good classroom practice.**



ment for background checks on all employees and volunteers.

In some cases, though, the perceived problems may be few in number and small in effect while the cost of new regulation is quite high. For example, a few cases of misspending, even of relatively small amounts, can lead to new reporting rules that can be quite costly to implement; indeed, prevention can cost more than the problem while not fully preventing further occurrences. Yet, if the public clamor is sufficient, resisting the call for greater regulation is virtually impossible. As a result, there can be much more scrutiny in many organizations of very small items, such as employee travel expenses than there is of whether the bulk of the budget is helping to meet the organization's goals. What gets noticed gets attended to, but the most important things aren't always the ones to get noticed.

There is good evidence that too much regulation can be counterproductive, as people tend to reduce effort and initiative when they feel they're distrusted, and too many rules can lead to lots of stupid behavior. As Dee Hock, founder of the Visa credit system put it, "Simple, clear purpose and principles give rise to complex, intelligent behaviors. Complex rules and regulations give rise to simple, stupid behaviors" (2010). Anyone who has worked in a large organization can attest to this reality!

Distrust of professions and institutions is fed not only by media attention but also by a better educated public that's increasingly disinclined to believe in the altruism and beneficence of professionals, as witnessed by concerns about levels of public confidence in virtually all institutions and professions around the world. Ironically, one result of education may be to make people less trustful of large institutions, including schools.

Participants at the Jerusalem meeting struggled with these questions. Not surprisingly, each group felt that it merited more trust and less regulation. On the other hand, everyone recognized

that both elements were important at every level of the system. But, in most cases, the balance was seen as being tilted too much toward regulation. Teachers especially felt that they weren't respected by the system as a whole.

Most importantly, it was clear that higher performing education systems tended to have less regulation and to rely more on strategies that involved not simply trust of individuals but building professional cultures that supported intelligent behavior directed toward organizational goals.

Indeed, this would seem to be the desired direction based on what we're learning about effective education systems. These rely neither on leaving it up to individuals to determine what they do, nor on trying to control practice through detailed regulation. Instead, effective systems build organizational and professional cultures in which there is strong collective pressure to improve performance and achieve goals, but also lots of support for people to improve their skills so they can contribute more effectively.

As is so often the case, good education policy mirrors good classroom practice. In effective classrooms, students feel a sense of autonomy and independence within a system that's carefully structured and organized to encourage the right kinds of actions. The desired practices and beliefs are nurtured not only by the organization of the classroom but also by social relationships built among participants.

These examples bring home the point that in any endeavor, strong teams display this same combination of individuals feeling impor-

tant coupled with powerful group norms around performance. The rules, if they're intelligent ones, provide a vital framework that encourages the right behavior. Good regulations play a key role in building trust. The wrong rules will have the opposite effect. The issue isn't whether to have rules or autonomy, but how to create regulations that help schools do the work we want them to do.

On this point, it was clear in Jerusalem, no country has it just right. There is always a tension between regulation and autonomy, and ongoing differences of opinion on the right balance are inevitable, perhaps even desirable. On the whole, though, there seems too much confidence in



**Those outside the system tend to favor policies with more regulation; insiders tend to favor more trust.**

education policy that we can get where we want primarily with a rulebook even though the evidence suggests otherwise. ■

#### Reference

Hock, D. (2010, February 17). Dee Hock on complex rules (web log post). <http://builtforchange.blogspot.ca/2010/02/dee-hock-on-complex-rules.html>

#### MEET THE COLUMNIST

**BEN LEVIN** ([ben.levin@utoronto.ca](mailto:ben.levin@utoronto.ca)) is a professor and Canada research chair in education leadership and policy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. His current research interests are in large-scale change, poverty and inequity, improving high schools, and finding better ways to connect research to policy and practice in education. He has been deputy minister (chief civil servant) for education for the province of Ontario and deputy minister of advanced education and deputy minister of education, training, and youth for the province of Manitoba. He is the author of seven books, including *How to Change 5,000 Schools* (Harvard Education Press, 2008) and *More High School Graduates* (Corwin Press, 2011).