

From Accreditation to Accountability

The nation's voluntary accreditation system has proven effective at encouraging self-improvement for school districts and, with modifications, it could inspire a new approach to accountability.

By Richard Rothstein,
Rebecca Jacobsen, and
Tamara Wilder



Except for the military, Americans devote more resources to education than to any other activity we undertake in common. Nearly 15% of all tax dollars support public schools. We depend on schools to narrow social and economic inequalities and to ensure that all youth contribute to the health of our democracy and the productivity of our economy.

Americans generally agree that schools should produce graduates with a balanced set of abilities — not only in academic subjects but in their social skills and work ethic, the fulfillment of citizenship obligations, in physical and emotional health, in the arts, and in their preparation for skilled work. A recent survey confirmed Americans' commitment to this balance (Rothstein and Jacobsen 2006). The public has a right to expect educators to pursue these ambitions competently and to spend effectively the funds entrusted to them for these ends.

An effective accountability system requires youth development institutions to demonstrate to the public's satisfaction that they're pursuing goals established through democratic processes, by using the most effective strategies available. The design of such accountability has become the focus of public debates about education.

The U.S. has adopted accountability policies based almost exclusively on standardized test scores. A diverse and bipartisan coalition of Americans has bemoaned this policy (see "A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education" at www.boldapproach.org) because narrow test-based accountability plans can't possibly accomplish their stated intent — to tell the states and nation whether schools and related public institutions are performing satisfactorily and to indicate where improvements are required. Indeed, by creating incentives for educators to shift effort and resources away from other goal areas and toward instruction in reading and math exclusively, such accountability has undermined schools' mission to also raise achieve-

ment in other academic areas and in the social, behavioral, and civic goals.

SCHOOL BOARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The United States has always had formal democratic accountability in education. Communities elect school boards, or mayors, who appoint superintendents who, in turn, appoint other staff and teachers to carry out policies set by the elected officials. Voters can and do re-elect or replace board members and mayors. But we've become skeptical that elected

We've become skeptical that school boards can hold educators responsible for raising performance for all students in all states and localities.

school boards can hold educators accountable for raising performance for all students in all states and localities.

Partly, the dissatisfaction is unavoidable. As school districts grew, elected board members found it more difficult to judge whether schools were performing well. Most superintendents now supervise such large organizations that they can't themselves evaluate principals' or teachers' effectiveness.

Elected board members, especially those on the first step of a political career ladder, may be more interested in burying bad news about schools than in correcting problems, and so they defer to educators' ways of doing things.

The mere fact that school board members must seek a mandate from voters in elections has provided an inadequate assurance that boards will hold educators accountable for satisfactory student achievement.

Yet, accountability for outcomes was the original inspiration for school boards. In 1642, the Massachusetts colonial legislature required town selectmen (councilmen) to check on parents and fine those who failed to teach their children to read and to understand both religious and secular law.

Today, however, school board members spend virtually no time evaluating educational outcomes; most board time is devoted to administrative matters like buying school sites or approving insurance policies, addressing new state or federal regulations, or voting on employee compensation alternatives.

Forgotten in this business has been a focus on the

■ *RICHARD ROTHSTEIN is a researcher affiliated with the Economic Policy Institute and the Teachers College Campaign for Educational Equity. REBECCA JACOBSEN is an assistant professor of education at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. TAMARA WILDER is a postdoctoral fellow at the Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. This article is adapted from their book, Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right (Teachers College Press, 2008).*

goals of education and a process for monitoring their achievement. Elected school boards' abdication of responsibility for holding educators accountable for achieving the broad goals of education has led us to believe that accountability is lacking in public education.

REGIONAL ACCREDITATION AGENCIES

Another structure is also in place that could, but doesn't, provide public accountability for achieving the broad goals of education. Six regional private agencies accredit elementary and secondary schools, and they could conceivably evolve to hold schools accountable for outcomes. Today, however, there are few consequences, besides embarrassment, when a school fails to win accreditation, though in some states graduates of accredited high schools can more easily be admitted to state universities or qualify for state scholarships.

Accreditation is mostly a peer-review process and, as such, it's responsible for a largely unheralded culture of continuous improvement in many schools nationwide. But voluntary peer review can't substitute for democratic accountability. Like school board governance, accreditation as currently practiced is inadequate.

From the start, the accreditation process focused on the quality of high school programs and resources, not the achievement of students. Examples of the types of policies accreditation agencies required schools to follow include:

- Offer designated courses;
- Maintain libraries that own reference materials and a specified number of books per pupil;
- Have a minimum number of teachers who are college graduates;
- Have science laboratories, gymnasiums, assembly halls, and ventilation systems;
- Be clean (and eventually to have indoor plumbing);
- Stay below a maximum pupil-teacher ratio;
- Have guidance counselors;
- Have a functioning parent-teacher association;
- Schedule a standard minimum school year and day; and
- Later, abide by minimum pay scales for teachers and other staff.

In some states, accreditation required providing children with annual dental checkups, health clinics for preschoolers, and referral services for children with emotional problems.

In most regions, schools undergo a year or two of preparation (called a self-study) before they are visited by a team of educators. Although some states require schools to undergo the process, in others, the regional associations are voluntary. In Alabama and Wyoming, for example, all schools participate, but in Texas only 4% do.



The mostly peer-review process of accreditation is responsible for a largely unheralded culture of continuous improvement in many schools nationwide.

Overall, about one fifth of the nation's 100,000 public schools are accredited — including most secondary and few elementary schools. Typically, schools that choose to apply for accreditation undergo comprehensive review from once every three years (in the Western states association) to a maximum of once every 10 years (in New England). In some cases, associations may require follow-up reports between school visits, while in others, schools in danger of losing accreditation may be visited more frequently.

As the accreditation process has evolved, it has continued to focus mostly on improving school programs and practices, not on student achievement of specified goals. The regional associations now claim to base accreditation reviews on outcomes, but this usually means that they expect school faculties to establish their own specific learning goals (typically test scores) and to achieve them; accreditation is then based on whether schools meet their targets and whether curric-



TO LEARN MORE about the history of education accountability in the United States, see Gregg Jackson's article, "Accounting for Accountability," at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k_v90/k0905jac.htm.

PDK members can comment on this article at PDKConnect, the organization's new online community. Log in at www.pdkintl.org to join the conversation.

ular practices and other school programs are properly aligned with the specific goals the faculty itself has set.

This can be helpful for schools attempting to improve, but it's not an accountability system. During the accreditation process, team members do not examine students to see if they have acquired appropriate knowledge and skills, appreciation of the arts, appropriate preparation for skilled employment, citizenship habits, social skills, or physical and emotional health attributes, nor are schools themselves required to assess this broad range of knowledge and skills and to report on their achievement. The regional associations propose a few broad categories of quality standards — the North Central and Southern associations, for example, have seven categories: vision and purpose, governance and leadership, teaching and learning, documenting and using results, resource and support systems, stakeholder communications and relationships, and commitment to continuous improvement. Standards of the other associations are similar.

In most cases, a year or two before an accreditation review, school leaders (the principal and usually a committee of faculty) propose goals for improvement and establish faculty committees to develop and implement appropriate plans. The goal-setting process is also likely to involve community members and parents, but, in practice, and especially in communities with low parent-education levels, school faculties write the mission statements and set goals for improvement. Even in communities with higher education levels, full-time education professionals (principals and teachers) inevitably have greater influence on the planning process than parent or community volunteers.

The regional associations have no tax support and are funded only by the membership dues of participating schools. As a result, their budgets are small, and the visiting accreditation teams are usually composed only of volunteers. Teams typically consist of five to 10 members for elementary schools and up to 15 for larger high schools. Volunteers are teachers or administrators from other schools in the region, and an effort is made to include teachers from various subject areas. Team leaders usually (but not always) have attended summer training sessions. Other team members typically have no formal training for the visits, though some may have participated on other teams.

An accreditation visit typically lasts three days, during which team members visit classrooms, interview teachers, meet with administrators, look at portfolios of student work, and talk with students and parents.

Because these visits are scheduled far in advance, little is random about the observations. Teachers may take care to present their best lessons during the visit; some school administrators may carefully select students and parents to be interviewed; and teachers may select unrepresentative work to include in the portfolios examined by team members. Nonetheless, trained visitors can get accurate insights into school quality. Teachers who aren't in the practice of inviting student inquiry during a lesson cannot suddenly expect students to ask questions, and students accustomed to direct instruction can't suddenly learn to work in problem-solving groups during an accreditation visit.

In most cases, team members are highly regarded professional educators and have great insight into issues of school instruction and organization. But the voluntary nature of the role makes quality control difficult to achieve. Experience and training are as important in school evaluation as they are in any professional activity. Because accreditation team members usually must be released from their regular teaching duties to participate on visiting teams, they can participate only rarely and don't develop the experience that professional evaluators would have.

Mentoring and evaluation require different skills from teaching, and though team members may be more insightful than noneducators, many are nonetheless inexperienced in evaluation. Even experienced and highly qualified teachers may not be familiar with the full range of reform and staff development programs available to schools. Without additional training, they aren't necessarily competent to

make recommendations about how other schools and teachers, in circumstances that may be quite different from their own, can make the most effective changes.

Even when schools receive full accreditation following visitation, reports will normally identify areas for recommended improvement. Some reports propose specific steps schools can take to improve. Examples of typical recommendations, taken from recent accreditation reports, include: differentiate instruction for students with distinct ability levels; establish a mentoring program for new teachers; improve the school climate by improving collaboration between administrators, teachers, and support staff; develop an assessment program for accurate placement of incoming students in academic programs; develop more elective courses; make time for early and late primary grade teachers to meet with each other to coordinate curriculum and instruction; increase parental involvement beyond chaperoning field trips; and disaggregate test scores by socioeconomic subgroups. Accredited schools usually make good-faith attempts to implement such sensible recommendations, and so the process results in real ongoing improvement.

But without a serious enforcement mechanism, recommendations may be ignored. Schools usually are expected to file follow-up reports documenting progress toward whatever recommendations were made. Accreditation agencies may threaten to withdraw accreditation if schools don't report that recommendations are being implemented, but the agencies have limited ability to verify self-reports of compliance.

In the most serious cases (about one-third of those in New England and one-eighth of those in the North Central and Southern regions), schools get formal warnings. Multiple warnings may result in the denial of unconditional accreditation. For schools on proba-

tion, follow-up visits may take place in subsequent years to confirm that improvement is taking place.

Because membership in the regional associations is voluntary in many states, and the regional associations depend on membership dues, associations are under some pressure to accredit schools they review. Schools denied accreditation will cease being association members, and other schools may also withdraw, fearing similar decisions. Schools that are far from meeting their regional association's standards are unlikely to apply for membership. Because most members of accreditation teams are from schools that are also subject to visits in the near future, team members are sometimes reluctant to find fault with schools they visit, realizing that too-tough standards might soon be applied to themselves. Accreditation reports generally aren't publicized (though they are now generally available on the web), but even this protection against embarrassment isn't always sufficient to encourage frank criticism.

And because team members aren't professional evaluators, they have difficulty juggling the two somewhat contradictory roles they're asked to fill: as friendly peer advisors, making suggestions to school faculties about how to improve, and as judges, determining whether schools should receive accreditation.

The accreditation process today plays an important role in the self-improvement processes of many schools. The requirement for a year or more of self-study before an accreditation visit focuses the attention of many schools' teachers and leadership on areas where reform is necessary. The observations and recommendations of visiting teams often reinforce this process and provide useful feedback to school staffs seeking to improve.

But important though self-improvement and peer review might be, these aren't the same as an accountability system, which involves meeting expectations of the American public and its political leaders for satisfactory student outcomes. Both forms of evaluation are necessary. Formalized peer review through the accreditation process can't substitute for public accountability.

MOVING TOWARD ACCOUNTABILITY

The United States is not the only nation that wants methods to hold schools accountable. But several other nations have taken a step beyond test scores and developed school inspection regimes to determine if student performance is satisfactory. In England, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, inspectors evaluate schools and report to the public on student achievement (including, but not limited to test

scores), civic values, character development, and behavior. In England, for example, inspectors are professionals, not volunteers, and their visits are mandatory. The English system continually evolves, but “Her Majesty’s Inspectors” (HMIs) have been inspecting schools since 1839. Until 2005, an elite group of about 200 HMIs were employed directly by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Other inspectors, usually retired school principals or teachers, were employed by firms with which Ofsted con-



The American accreditation system includes many elements that could easily be adapted for accountability purposes.

tracted to conduct inspections. Ofsted trained all inspectors and required periodic retraining and certification to ensure quality. Because of their experience and training, English inspectors were highly respected by teachers and principals, who therefore took the advice of inspectors seriously. Ofsted also required that inspection teams include one lay inspector to give the inspections greater credibility with the public.

Until 2005, Ofsted inspectors were required to spend most of their time observing classroom teaching. Inspectors selected students to interview about their understanding and examined random samples of student work, minimizing the chance that they were being shown atypical student achievement. To avoid the problem of observing scripted lessons, prepared specifically for the inspection period, Ofsted reduced the notice period for inspections to just two days. In 2008, Ofsted announced that it would begin experimenting with no-notice inspections. Schools are now visited every few years, with highly rated schools visited less frequently with smaller teams, and schools with a history of poor ratings visited more often and more intensively.

Since 2005, the inspectorate system has been in a state of flux as it experiments with shortened visits, smaller teams, and increased emphasis on test scores. It is too soon to evaluate recent changes in their inspectorate system.

Inspectors’ judgments have been based on nation-

ally established goals, not school-determined priorities. While test scores have played a role in inspectors’ judgments, inspectors’ reports have included ratings for a wide range of observed activities — including both academic and nonacademic outcomes. For example, inspectors have rated teaching skill, student participation, student behavior in the hallways, playground practices, and the extent of extracurricular activities available. Ofsted’s focus on a broad set of goals has led it to coordinate inspections of schools and supporting institutions in the community, such as early childhood centers, health care services, and lifelong learning opportunities. Ofsted’s inspection teams provide their publics with assurance that schools and other community youth-development institutions are not only making good efforts, but are actually achieving their missions.

The American accreditation system includes many elements that could easily be adapted for accountability purposes. With some modification, based in part on lessons learned from the English inspectorate system, the accreditation system could be transformed into elements of an accountability system. Regional associations could specify state-endorsed cognitive and behavioral outcomes, and the associations could develop measurement tools to assess whether schools actually contribute to these outcomes — not only whether they follow appropriate instructional practices, but whether satisfactory student learning is actually achieved. True accountability would make accreditation mandatory, not voluntary; outside intervention and remediation would have to accompany serious warnings that might lead to loss of accreditation.

To fulfill an accountability role, associations should become quasi-governmental agencies with tax support and budgets large enough to conduct school visits more frequently and to employ trained professional evaluators — although volunteers should also serve as observers on visiting teams. For accountability reviews, volunteer observers could include parents and other members of the public, such as local business, civic, or political leaders. Exposing the process to public scrutiny in this way would give it much-needed credibility.

The American accreditation system provides a start toward meaningful accountability; to get there, however, modifications are necessary. **■**

REFERENCE

Rothstein, Richard, and Rebecca Jacobsen. “The Goals of Education.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 88 (December 2006): 264-272.

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0905rot.pdf

Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder, From Accreditation to Accountability, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 90, No. 09, May 2009, pp. 624-629.

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
Bloomington, Indiana 47405-3800
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at

<http://www.pdkintl.org/search.htm>.