The issue of whether the federal government should outline and enforce an accountability system for states, school districts, and schools was essentially settled the day that George W. Bush took office as president. Bush had made “accountability” a cornerstone of his education platform, using his stated goal of ensuring equity for poor and minority children as a way of bolstering his credentials as a moderate. New Democrats, led by Democratic senators Joseph Lieberman and Evan Bayh, were also committed to the idea of accountability. They had made a results-based approach to federal education programs a major component of their “Three R’s” proposal—on which much of the Bush plan and the final ESEA legislation were based.

The legislation would build on the accountability measures first introduced during the 1994 reauthorization. That legislation required the states to develop academic standards and tests linked to the standards, but its accountability language was too vague and porous. For example, under the 1994 legislation, states were required to define “adequate yearly progress” in a way that resulted in “continuous and substantial yearly improvement” by schools and school districts toward the goal of getting all students to the proficient level. With states defining the annual yearly progress standard and with no concrete timeline in place, practices varied widely from state to state. This led to great differences in results at the state level. Michigan and Arkansas identified 76 percent and 64 per-

**A NEW PARTNERSHIP**

The move toward federally imposed accountability standards is necessary to ensure that federal funds are enhancing educational opportunity, especially for poor and minority students. It will all be for naught, however, if Congress doesn’t guarantee that states will receive the resources necessary to overhaul failing schools.

by ANDREW ROTHERHAM
cent, respectively, of their Title I schools as low performing, while Connecticut and Maryland identified only 6 percent each. Regardless, the low-performing label is sadly almost meaningless: 41 percent of principals in these schools reported not even being aware of the designation. And for schools that were identified as low performing there was little in the way of sustained assistance. According to a Department of Education analysis, only 40 percent of schools identified as needing improvement received assistance from the state or their school district. This dismal statistic climbs to only 50 percent for schools that have been identified as low performing for three or more years.

In this system, what passed for accountability was the ability to provide detailed reports of planned and actual spending of federal funds—in other words, a system of accounting, not of accountability. In addition, the federal government was quite lax in enforcing the accountability provisions that were in the law. As a result, as of this writing only 16 states had fully complied with the requirements of the 1994 ESEA reauthorization.

Critics have seized on the states’ seeming inability to comply with the previous law as evidence of the folly of proceeding down the accountability route. In fact, critics warn, these federal efforts to demand results-based accountability are at best futile and at worst drive all sorts of perverse and unintended consequences, jeopardizing recent accomplishments at the state and local level. These arguments are the dullest yet most common arrows in the quivers of those fighting change. And they fall apart under close scrutiny. The critics’ alternative to the accountability plan is to keep the federal dollars flowing regardless of the results. They have little to offer beyond tired bromides about needing more money for “capacity building” and a host of other buzzwords that make no difference in the lives of children who attend failing schools.

**Why Federal Accountability?**

The states’ haphazard results in complying with the 1994 requirements and improving low-performing schools overall are precisely why the law’s accountability provisions ought to be strengthened and clarified. In a host of policy areas inside and outside of education, history shows that clear federal prescriptions accompanied by real consequences bring results. That’s why, for example, you can’t buy an alcoholic drink almost anywhere in the country if you’re under 21. It’s why our cars and airplanes are increasingly safe. And it’s why the vestiges of discrimination are being eradicated from our schools and society, through laws like the Civil Rights Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Federal policymakers did not wait for states to address these issues on their own. Nor did they lament the states’ incapacity to do so. Rather, they mandated clear standards and demanded results.

Increasing the rigor and specificity of the accountability provisions in ESEA doesn’t mean imposing the same system on every state, or a “one size fits all” approach in the political jargon. It means establishing clear criteria for improve-
dard that says all cars must contain pas-
senger-side airbags by a certain date and
one that defines what it means to be ac-
dademically proficient. Complicated issues
of how to measure success or failure vex
the process of education policymaking.
Still, complicated doesn't mean futile. It
doesn't mean we should just throw up
our hands in collective frustration, because
in the end it is simply irresponsible to
continue pouring resources into systems
that we know are failing without estab-
lishing clear benchmarks for their
improvement and consequences if they
do not reach them. To do otherwise essen-
tially makes W ashington the enabler in a
terribly dysfunctional relationship that
victimizes poor and minority children. It
is ironic that many of the same interest
groups and individuals that so readily
look to W ashington to address various
ills suddenly resist federal intrusion in
this particular area. Are they satisfied
with a situation where African-American and H ispanic 12th
graders read and do ma th as well as white 8th graders?
W here, according to an analysis by Jay Greene of the M an-
hattan Institute, only 56 percent of African-A merican stu-
dents and 54 percent of H ispanics graduate from high school?
Perhaps it's because white students score higher on
achievement tests and graduate at substantially higher rates
that many of the loudest voices in this debate aren't troubled
by asking for patience and time to get things exactly right
before proceeding. These critics can represent a powerful bloc.
Consider that in states like M assachusetts, Virginia, and
N ew York, resistance to the accountability system has come
predominantly from affluent white suburbs. Call it the Scars-
dale Syndrome. In M assachusetts, writes G eorgia A lexakis
in the W ashington M onthly, the paradox of these reform efforts
is, “T he schools most likely to do poorly on the M CAS [the
state test in M assachusetts] have also been most likely to
embrace it, while those districts whose scores are already quite
high are fighting hardest to get rid of it.” T he relative polit-
ical strengths in such a fight are sadly obvious; this is one more
reason why accountability can't be left solely to the states.

Listening to the critics' complaints, one is left wondering,
W hat are the wondrous accomplishments that more rigor-
ous accountability will place in jeopardy? It is clear that we
have failed to successfully educate poor and minority students
on a large-scale basis. It is also clear that despite their best
intentions many teachers, principals, superintendents, and
professors at schools of education do not know how to
address these shortcomings on a meaningful scale. Federal
requirements driving states to address these problems would
be much more troubling if they were interfering with a vari-
ety of successful state and local approaches, but that is sim-
ply not the case. In fact, based on what we know, federal
accountability provisions will complement the most suc-
cessful state practices.

States Show Results
W ill there be unintended consequences from the new federal
accountability provisions? U ndoubtedly, W ill they all be per-
verse? N o one knows, and unintended consequences that
prove positive are certainly not unheard of. W e do, however,
know something of the intended consequences policymakers
hope for. T here is evidence that accountability systems with
concrete goals change the behavior of school systems, at a min-
imum by refocusing efforts on disadvantaged students. Con-
sider the experiences of M assachusetts, Virginia, and Texas.
In M assachusetts, students are tested in key grades and will soon need to pass exit exams to graduate
from high school, Cassandras predicted all kinds of pernicious
results. T hey haven't materialized. In fact, although much work
remains, test scores are steadily rising in both states.

D uring the past four years, the share of Virginia students
passing the Algebra I and Algebra II Standards of Learning
(SOL) assessments has risen by 34 and 43 percent, respectively.
T he pass rates for African-A merican students have gone
from 20 percent to 59 percent in Algebra I and 13 percent to
58 percent in Algebra II since 1998. Virginia still needs to
address a substantial achievement gap, but its minority students’ scores have clearly improved.

In Massachusetts, test-score performance improved, once graduation requirements were imposed (see Figure 1). In 2001, 75 percent of 10th graders passed the math portion of the state’s MCAS test, and 82 percent passed the language-arts test. This is up from 55 percent and 66 percent, respectively, the previous year. The Massachusetts example is particularly encouraging in light of Acheive, Inc.’s recent finding that “The grade 10 tests are rigorous yet reasonable—and are, in fact, the most challenging of the exit-level tests Acheive has yet reviewed.” Acheive also lauded Massachusetts for its work to align its standards, curriculum, and assessments, which has provided a model for other states.

In Texas, where the TAAS test is widely considered to be less rigorous than the SOLs or MCAS tests (although the state is revising the TAAS), minority students nonetheless have shown gains that are corroborated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. There is considerable evidence that during the past decade in Texas the needs of minority students have received increased attention as a result of an accountability system that demands that a school show not only overall progress, but also progress among its most disadvantaged charges.

Accountability systems are no panacea, and there are certainly problems in Texas and elsewhere. But these results at least indicate that accountability systems can help to focus attention on poor and minority students whose needs have been ignored or neglected. These results also seem to prove the point that states, if left to their own devices, will take action. It’s true that the accountability movement has certainly problems in Texas and elsewhere. But these results also seem to prove the point that states, if left to their own devices, will take action. It’s true that the accountability movement has been state-led, to a large extent. Yet most states have yet to meet the requirements of the 1994 law, and it’s clear that some won’t move forward in any aggressive way without federal action.

What Must Be Done

Obviously, designing an accountability system of this nature is complex. Any workable proposal must be clear to practitioners; fair in the sense of not holding educators accountable for things they can’t control; technically sound; and supported and enforced. It also should not squelch promising approaches that the states are developing.

Perhaps the most contentious issue in this debate is the use of standardized tests to measure school performance. Much of the hostility to accountability is actually just hostility toward testing. While standardized tests are certainly not perfect (in fact, they’re primitive from a technological point of view), they’re still the best objective way to measure progress. They lay bare discrepancies in educational quality in a quantifiable way. Sure, too many state assessment systems are lacking in quality or rigor. Yet this is a case for improvement, not abandonment.

There are legitimate complaints about the ways in which states are using the results of standardized tests. As Thomas Kane and Douglas Staiger point out (see “Randomly Accountable,” in this issue), test scores bounce up and down from year-to-year for a variety of reasons that are unrelated to actual school performance. Thus no system should rely solely on the snapshot of a single year’s test scores in making decisions about incentives or consequences. Accountability systems also need to include safeguards against the statistical unreliability of small classes and demographic groups that may include only a few students at a particular school.

Because some states are experimenting with value-added approaches to measuring school progress, it’s important that federal accountability standards allow for this type of innovation. And while it may be desirable to have a purely technocratic system that makes no allowances for political and human impulses, it is not feasible. Because schools are human institutions shaped by a variety of forces and influences that may or may not be within their control, some “give” is required to address exceptional circumstances that will inevitably arise. States should have discretion to undertake and prioritize interventions and consequences. But such discretion (or “safe harbor” provisions) need not equal the vague 1994 language or allow states to use measures that are divorced from academic results or are purely subjective and porous. During the debate over the federal “annual yearly progress” standard, many of the proposals that would have included other indicators as measures of a school’s annual yearly progress were simply thinly disguised attempts to eradicate any rigor from the system. There were proposals to, among other things, hold schools accountable only for the progress of the lowest-performing students in the bottom quintile; not disaggregate data by race and ethnicity; require states to deal only with the lowest-performing schools; or ignore test results altogether as an accountability tool.

The new law appears to have addressed all of these issues in a workable manner. In the end, it may well turn out that the president’s mandate that states annually test all children...
in grades 3 through 8 will prove to be much more burdensome and troubling for states than the new accountability provisions. It’s also entirely possible that the annual yearly progress provisions will cause trouble, as more and more schools wind up on lists of the low performing and politicians take the heat. Nonetheless, there is reason for cautious optimism.

What Washington must avoid is simply demanding accountability and then walking away. The new Democratic Lieberman-Bayh approach on education was predicated not only on more accountability, but also on more investment, more flexibility for states and localities, and a strategic federal role aimed at helping states and localities solve these problems, serving almost as a consultant to states and localities. This argues for a more active but less programmatic federal role in education.

States are increasingly failing to reach their revenue targets as a result of the slowing economy. The reforms of the ESEA legislation, especially the testing requirements, will require an expenditure of state resources on issues that aren’t tied directly to the day-to-day provision of education. In a tight fiscal climate, testing and accountability initiatives will be curtailed or put on hold before direct services. It’s up to Washington to help see that states aren’t forced to make this choice. It is also essential that funding for interventions in low-performing schools accompany the new requirements. President Clinton inaugurated an accountability fund as part of Title I as a way to focus resources specifically on this purpose. However, more money will not provide a solution without enforcing clear goals for results.

There must also be a greater emphasis on getting these new resources to underserved communities. Funds must be concentrated rather than spread as far and wide as possible for political advantage. Democratic senator Mary Landrieu, a cosponsor of the “Three R’s” bill, worked tirelessly, and against considerable opposition from members of both political parties, to increase the targeting of federal education dollars to low-income communities and schools in an effort to better support their school reform efforts.

Unfortunately, this legislation does not do enough to define the federal role in terms of consolidating programs and increasing local flexibility to meet diverse circumstances. The law includes flexibility provisions and some streamlining that are improvements. However, if raising overall test-score performance and addressing the achievement gap are to be the main focus of federal policy, it is foolish to have a panoply of programs that direct state and local officials toward a host of other priorities, distracting them from their core mission.

Someone must enforce the new rules if they are to be workable. Washington will encounter resistance at both the federal and state levels. As Senator Bayh of Indiana aptly told the Los Angeles Times in the midst of the debate, “Everyone is for accountability until it actually gets put into place and applies to them.” Washington has a dismal record of enforcing its dictates in education. Of course, considering some of those dictates, sometimes this is a blessing. But one lesson of the 1994 reforms is that without enforcement states will simply ignore or delay parts of federal education laws they don’t like. Tightening and clarifying the accountability provisions and then failing to enforce them only means states will be ignoring a new set of requirements. That’s not much of an improvement on the status quo.

It’s worth remembering that an army of naysayers predicting adverse consequences, or at best futility, has accompanied every major federal policy shift in education. However, the positive impact of accountability systems, particularly for the poor and minority students who traditionally have been excluded from educational opportunities, outweighs the risks. Mistakes will be made, lessons will be learned, policies will be fine-tuned. But we shouldn’t delay the good while waiting for the perfect.

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