

Comments on the Essay "Building a High-Quality Assessment and Accountability Program: The Philadelphia Example"

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Introduction

Americans in recent years have asked their schools to do something entirely unprecedented: educate all of their students, not simply their top fifth, and educate all of them to levels far higher than were required in the past. The pedagogical vehicle introduced to achieve these goals standards-based school reform — requires major changes in classroom instruction, in how schools are organized to support these changes, and by the infusion of new funds.

Although 49 states have embraced the standards movement, only a few have recognized the need for systems of accountability to accompany these reforms. The evidence available from around the country makes generally clear that accountability works. States showing the most significant gains in the National Assessment of Educational Progress — Kentucky, North Carolina and Texas — are also the states that have increased school funding and implemented effective systems of accountability, while the experience of those that have not, such as New Jersey, suggests the futility of standards reforms without accountability. More money alone wins the equity battle, but loses the school reform war.

The paper by Andrew Porter and Mitch Chester describes the accountability system used in Philadelphia as part of Children Achieving, the complex standards-driven reform agenda put in place by David Hornbeck, who came to Philadelphia in 1994 as Superintendent of the public schools. The authors' account is a detailed and highly accurate portrayal of the system instituted by the School District. It is especially commendable for providing readers with a "how to do it" primer as well as a rich description of the adjustments that were made in "mid-stream" as the system evolved in response to many specific challenges encountered along the way.

Dan Koretz of the RAND Corporation has reviewed the paper using a sophisticated psychometric lens, and while he found serious problems in the student test data, I remain convinced that real progress was made despite the shortcomings he identified. Ultimately persuasive is that student test scores continued to rise even though over time more and more students, particularly lower performing students, took the tests; and that the scores improved on both the state's test (PSSA) as well on the tests used by the School District (SAT-9). Despite the methodological concerns raised by Koretz, these factors suggest strongly that some good things were happening in Philadelphia.

Since psychometrics is not my field, my contributions are to establish the local and national contexts in which to understand the Philadelphia experience. Children Achieving included ten key elements — the tenth being an insistence that for the program to succeed all of the preceding nine had to be implemented. The record of standards-based school reform across school districts of all sizes and in all locations makes absolutely clear that success is difficult to achieve in the best of circumstances — that is, when adequate financial resources are available and all key

stakeholders from the teachers' unions and administrators to the school board and parents share the same goal.

This was decidedly not the case in Philadelphia. It is not possible to parse out from the overall reform effort the separate contributions to student achievement accounted for by the accountability component, but it is important to understand at the outset that many factors external to the reform plan had an enormous impact on its outcomes. Given the opposition of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), the lack of adequate financial resources to support the reforms, the complicating role of race, and the resistance of those with vested interests in the non-instructional components of the status quo, what impresses most is that Children Achieving succeeded at all.

The Philadelphia Context

Union Opposition

That Superintendent Hornbeck and the PFT got off to a bad start is undeniable. Why remains a matter of dispute. Union leaders insisted they were ignored from the outset — that the Superintendent refused to open his plan to compromise. Hornbeck, a key architect of the standards-based school reforms undertaken in Kentucky in the early '90s and a nationally-known educator, contended that he had a 10-point plan to reform the city's troubled schools, and that he had been invited to Philadelphia by the school board and the mayor to implement it.

There is no question, however, that the plan's accountability system did not sit well with the union. "Teacher performance and student achievement," argued Deborah Willig, the attorney representing the PFT, "have nothing to do with each other." And Jack Steinberg, the union's secretary, answered his own question on PBS's Murrow Report: "Can you evaluate a teacher on the performance of the students? No, you cannot." When the first teacher contract was negotiated in 1996, the School District hailed its accountability components, while the union applauded the absence of such provisions and declared accountability "dead."

Both the union and the district sought ways out of their impasse, meeting behind the scenes on repeated occasions. Sandra Feldman, national president of the AFT, came to Philadelphia at the behest of the mayor in an effort to bridge the gap. Labor-management consultants were hired to help the two sides find common ground, but all to no avail. As time passed the lines drawn early between them not only failed to close, but the distance separating them grew. The union opposed Children Achieving almost from the start. The PFT Reporter, the union's monthly newsletter, kept up regular attacks on the reform plan. Depending on which side of the fence you sat, these could be characterized as a steady stream of compelling criticism or poisonous invective. By the end of Hornbeck's tenure in 2000, and despite improvements in test scores, attendance, and dropout rates, the large majority of Philadelphia teachers surveyed claimed they had no confidence in the reform plan or in the Superintendent. So strong was the PFT's opposition that when Hornbeck announced his resignation, and the local media reflected on his accomplishments, the union refused to acknowledge the gains that had been made. The irony in so doing was to deny its own members credit for the substantial improvement in student performance their labors had produced.

Inadequate Resources

The second major obstacle faced by Children Achieving was the lack of adequate financial resources to make the reforms work. The School District needed more than \$100 million to close an existing deficit, and Hornbeck estimated that an additional \$350 million would be required annually to cover the costs of multiple interventions—full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes in K-3, up-to-date technologies and facilities, after-school and summer school programs, and family centers, among many others—that children from low-income families would need in order to make and sustain academic gains.

Philadelphia spends close to \$2,000 less per child than the average of the school districts in the surrounding suburban counties, which means that in each classroom of 30 students there is roughly \$60,000 less to spend for their education. Had the Philadelphia School District, with 215,000 children, been able to spend simply the same amount per child as the average in the suburban districts, the justifiably ambitious reform agenda of Children Achieving would have been more than fully funded.

Children Achieving never received the funding it needed, and the sources of the district's relatively inadequate per pupil spending are found at both the local and state level. Although the city's school tax effort is low when compared with other communities in Pennsylvania, Philadelphians carry the highest overall tax burden in the Commonwealth, which is why the city is unable to raise the local real estate tax that supports its schools.

The major source of the problem is inadequate state funding. In 1975, the Commonwealth provided roughly 55 percent of total school funding; since then it has fallen to 35 percent, which means that school districts have had to turn largely to local property taxes to make up for the shortfall. Although observers find it hard to believe because Pennsylvania ranks 8th in per pupil spending nationally, its funding system is actually a "non-system," no longer related to either enrollment or poverty or shaped by policy and principle. A Pennsylvania House of Representatives "Resolution" (HR42), which passed in June, 2001, by a vote of 195-1, called the state's approach to school funding "nationally recognized as one of the most inequitable among the 50 states." Education Week gave Pennsylvania a grade of "D-" for its school funding system, which many describe as among the "most regressive" in the nation. Even the State Board of Education recently formed a sub-committee to examine the charges of inadequacy and inequity and to recommend changes. Although Philadelphia receives 59 percent of its funding from the state, the problems described above, for example, the district has received no additional per pupil funding despite a growth in student enrollment of over 21,000 since 1991—explain the district's plight. In the last six years, the district's budget grew more slowly than inflation after accounting for the costs of safety and security, ESOL, charter schools, all-day kindergarten, and court-mandated placements in social service agencies. The district faces a projected budget deficit for FY02 of \$233 million.

New funding remains a necessary rather than a sufficient means to raise student achievement standards-based reform and accountability being the others. Children Achieving lacked the financial resources remotely commensurate to meet the unique challenges it faced in raising the academic achievement level of 215,000 students, the majority of whom were minorities living in poverty.

Other factors—race, media coverage, and the power of vested interests to protect their investment in the status quo—posed serious obstacles to the Children Achieving reform agenda. Some people felt that Hornbeck, who is white, should not have been given the job. In fact, the school board was split: four minority members wanted an African-American candidate and the four white members wanted Hornbeck. At the final tally, the tie was broken when a ninth and deciding vote was cast for Hornbeck by Ruth Hayre, herself an African American, reportedly because Hornbeck favored accountability. Some black activists insisted that a white superintendent was an inappropriate role model.

Warren Simmons, currently the President of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and himself an African American, was publicly scolded by the African American City Council President and almost lost his job as president of the Philadelphia Education Fund, because he had the temerity to argue at an education conference session in New Orleans that race was in fact an important issue in Philadelphia school reform.

The city's two major newspapers—the Daily News (its readers are primarily city residents) and the Philadelphia Inquirer (its subscription base is majority suburban)—although owned by the same parent company (Knight Ridder's Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc.), chose opposite sides in the debate over Hornbeck and Children Achieving. The editor, reporters and columnists at the Daily News found fault most everywhere, supporting the union and keeping the issue of race near the surface; the Philadelphia Inquirer, in contrast, was generally supportive of the Superintendent and his reform agenda. This diet of daily argument in the city's press over the value of Children Achieving clearly undermined efforts to forge a public consensus behind the reform effort.

Finally, school reform of any significant stripe poses a challenge to the status quo. Roughly 30 percent of the School District's annual budget goes for non-instructional expenses—transportation, food services, construction, physical plant, and the like. In a district the size of Philadelphia, that means that almost half a billion dollars in contracts goes out each year to companies and vendors of all types for a wide array of support services. When Hornbeck divided the school district into 22 clusters—each with several elementary-, two or three middle- and one high school (a feeder pattern)—and talked about budgetary independence down the road, many people felt the security of their business arrangements were threatened. School reformers have much to learn about how their efforts can be stymied by those with vested interests in the noninstructional component of the status quo.

The National Context

As the only developed nation that does not mandate federal standards, assessments and curriculum, there is good reason to applaud the speed with which states have embraced reform. In less than a decade's time, 49 states have mandated standards. But there is also reason to be concerned about how standards-based school reform is being implemented. A front-page story in the New York Times on Labor Day, 1999, reflected this phenomenon. While reporting on the rapid spread of the standards movement, there was no discussion of the need to provide extensive professional development so educators would be able to help their students meet the more demanding standards. The implicit assumption appeared to be that it was necessary only to "raise the bar" and put in "high-stakes tests," and then kick all those lazy teachers and kids in the pants

in order to close the skills gap separating American students from their future competitors growing up in the Pacific Rim and Western Europe.

That is patent nonsense. Standards-based reform will surely fail without fundamental changes in classroom instruction and in how schools are organized to support these changes. For well over a century, our schools did their job well. But in a very real sense, it is not reasonable to believe that the existing school system, whose historic task was to educate the top fifth of their students and to socialize the rest for work in an industrial era, will succeed in educating all their students to the unprecedentedly high levels required by the high-tech and fiercely competitive global economy of the 21st century.

Large urban districts, such as Philadelphia, as well as rural districts and middle-class suburban districts, have serious capacity problems pre-school, full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes in K-3, after-school and summer school programs and the like that require significant new funding. But all school districts, even the well-heeled suburban ones where ill-founded complacency abounds fed by the results of norm-referenced tests that are highly correlated with family income have need for massive professional development so that educators are able to teach the problem-solving pedagogy that lies at the core of standards reform.

Accountability as Catalyst for Fundamental Change

For some, accountability is punitive a cudgel to beat up on the teachers' unions and the educational establishment in general who resist vouchers and charter schools. For others, accountability is a catalyst for an indispensable conversation about the fundamental changes that will be necessary if schools are to succeed in helping students meet high standards. "If you are going to hold us accountable," educators should be arguing, "then we insist on changes in the laws that govern K-12 and in the level of resources required to get the job done." In this fashion, accountability becomes part of a critical quid-pro-quo that exchanges positive and negative consequences for educators in return for a new set of rules and the infusion of substantial new school funding.

A deserved sense of urgency should be widely shared. The failure of standards-based reform schools unable to provide students with the problem-solving skills they must have to compete in the new economy puts the middle-class basis of the nation at risk. Data for the last 25 years make clear that almost all the gains in income went to the top fifth of American families, in largest measure because of education. A panel of 18 prominent economists convened by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York argued that half the growth in income inequality could be accounted for by "new technologies that favor the better educated."

The record of reform over the last quarter century is sobering. Despite considerable effort, student test scores whether measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress or the Third International Math and Science Survey remain essentially flat. These trends should force everyone concerned about the future to recognize that real improvements will require fundamental changes. Here are some of the major issues that should be addressed.

Disconnect Between Inputs And Outcomes

Many people in the private sector look at K-12 public education in puzzlement. Here is a \$330 billion industry in which employees get paid to come to work, but there is no relationship

between what their labors produce and their level of compensation. This disconnect between “inputs” and “outcomes” does not exist in other professions and represents a fatal flaw in the current system. While they admit that teachers are not drawn to the profession because they are attracted by the pay (which is often insufficient), they argue that unless the system is changed so that the most successful can be rewarded and those whose teaching hurts children can be remediated or released, the system will not improve. They acknowledge that previous systems of “merit pay” have failed in the past, but argue that there are many ways to create incentives that will work, including group- or school-based as well as individual-level incentives that do not put teachers in competition with each other in order to receive rewards. Required remediation for poor performers is a must, they contend, and those who fail to improve their teaching skills, following coaching and additional training, should be required to leave the profession. Raising teacher standards amidst a teacher shortage requires opening alternate sources of recruitment and flexibility to permit part-time teaching, not a retreat from quality. As John Grossman, president of the Columbus (OH) Education Association says, “Not everyone has the right to be a teacher in the 21st century.”

The “Culture of the Core”

In “Building a New Structure for School Leadership” (Albert Shanker Institute: Winter, 2000), Richard Elmore describes the theory of “loose coupling” that joins the two parts of K-12: the “core,” which consists of teachers and students, and the “administrative superstructure” around the core, which consists of superintendents, administrators, principals and school board members. When teachers close the door to their individual classrooms, what happens between them and their students is personal and intimate, and they believe even a bit magical and mysterious. But overall it is private they believe this is how it should be and it is the responsibility of the administrators to buffer the core from outside interference. Is it any wonder, then, Elmore asks, that when through innovation, creativity and originality a teacher finds a better way for students to learn, the breakthrough is necessarily confined to that classroom, or to a few adjacent classrooms infected by the individual teacher, or on rare occasions is spread through an entire building because its principal has exceptional qualities as an instructional leader? Because normative behavior in the core supports isolated teaching as something good, right and valuable to be protected, it should not be surprising that no mechanism exists in K-12 to identify “best practices” and to spread these models of effective teaching to all classrooms in the nation’s 16,000 school districts so improvements in student achievement can be secured system wide.

Collective Bargaining

No one vaguely familiar with American labor history should have any doubts about the importance of having unions to protect the interests of workers. Over the last thirty years, labor unions have won major gains for the nation’s teachers, but collective bargaining in our schools has not come as an unmixed blessing. The line drawn in the sand, dividing labor and management, gave the “bread and butter” issues to the unions salaries, benefits, working conditions, job security and all the others to management. Not only has this process “hardened the hearts” on both sides, making collaboration exceedingly difficult, but this system now stands squarely in the way of fundamental reforms.

Whether one calls it “distributed leadership” or “power sharing,” all educators, labor and management, must now share the responsibility for reform. How can the door to the classroom

be opened how can instruction be made public without schools becoming places characterized by trust between teachers and administrators?

Success in standards-based reform requires changing the culture of the core so that it becomes normative for teachers to share their talents, and implementing systems of incentives and sanctions to promote quality teaching. But none of this will be possible in environments devoid of trust, where labor and management far too often play the roles of the Hatfields and McCoys in futile episodes of “us” versus “them” repeated at each contract negotiation. Teachers’ unions must want to become full partners in shaping reform, and they must be welcomed in this role by school boards and administrators.

Role of “Value-Added” Assessment

Among the significant barriers to improving instruction and for developing confidence among teachers that their craft should be made public is the widespread belief that no fair way exists to measure the impact of teaching on student performance. The work of William Sanders, the architect of Tennessee’s “value-added” assessment system, challenges that notion. The system operates by projecting forward one year’s growth based on a student’s record of prior academic achievement; it then compares this “expected” growth to the “actual” growth to determine whether each student has achieved one year’s growth from his or her own starting point in the teacher’s classroom. Since in this system each student serves as his or her own statistical control family background, income, race and other exogenous variables are constant in each student from September to June the socioeconomic composition of students in a classroom does not affect the measurements. Thus the value-added approach genuinely levels the playing field for teachers. A decade of student achievement data in Tennessee linking all the students to the teachers who taught them makes clear that effective teaching is 10 to 20 times more powerful in predicting student achievement than any of the other variables, including race, family background or class size. When tied to an annual test that measures higher-order thinking skills that is, a test to which teachers can teach with confidence value-added assessment, with its objective, empirical basis for measuring the impact of teaching on student learning, should be a critical component of successful standards-based school reform. The recent call by President Bush for annual testing in grades 3-8 provides an opportunity to build an assessment system that measures the appropriate knowledge and skills for the Information Society of the 21st century. States should resist the temptation to do this it on the cheap, thereby undermining the purpose of assessment.

Accountability as the Quid-Pro-Quo for New School Funding

In well-off suburban school districts, where complacency characterizes the response to standards-based reform, accountability is required to command the attention of school boards and educators. Everywhere else accountability is required to secure the new funding necessary to build capacity and to underwrite the costs of the massive professional development needed by teachers to improve the quality of their classroom instruction and by administrators to succeed in their role as instructional leaders.

Americans who came of age at mid-century lived in communities with rich, poor and middle-class neighborhoods, but their school taxes went to a single school district. After 50 years of suburbanization, and the zoning game that guides and filters population by income, Americans have sorted themselves out into rich, semi-rich, middle-class, working class and poor

communities. As a result, in the large majority of school districts (approximately two-thirds of those in Pennsylvania), the local real estate tax no longer provides an adequate base for school funding.

In the future new funding must come from broad state taxes such as the personal income tax or the sales tax (those with a narrow base exempting food, clothing and other necessities are not regressive). Winning significant tax increases from state legislatures will require support from all constituencies, and the most likely way to achieve broad-base support is to offer the public a quid-pro-quo. In return for accountability defined loosely here as holding educators responsible for what students learn the state will provide school districts with the new funds they require. The tradition of local control is strong in America, but if the states put up the lion's share of school funding, they will insist properly that school districts adopt contracts with their educators that incorporate state-approved systems of accountability.

Contracts can exploit teachers and administrators, and they can be co-opted by the same groups. The devil will certainly be in the details, but everyone will be well served by working to achieve a compromise on accountability that is acceptable to the teachers' unions and the business community, the two groups with the power to veto such legislation. The systems of accountability that succeed will be fair to educators and credible to the public, and have as their central goal raising student achievement.

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