

Introduction

Accountability in education is inevitable. The choice for educational and community leaders is not whether to have accountability. Instead, these leaders must decide how to make this slippery concept effective and fair. In the pages that follow, you will find a step-by-step guide for creating a holistic accountability system that will improve student achievement, create a motivated and professionally engaged staff, and transform accountability from an emotionally laden and destructive term to one that is constructive and rational.

The need for accountability could not be more pronounced. Political forces demand it and a growing number of school systems are making the word “accountability” a primary theme of everything from teacher negotiations to leadership decisions to student promotion. The very word accountability evokes strong emotional reactions both from advocates and from critics. Accountability advocates are typically those who have grown impatient with the slow progress of many schools and who believe that continued toleration of mediocrity and excuses denies educational opportunity to children. Accountability critics express fear for the victims of accountability. These victims, in the views of accountability critics, include children denied promotion, teachers denied tenure, and principals terminated from their leadership positions all because of test score performance.

Thus the debate over educational accountability is dominated by two extreme and unproductive views. At one extreme are those who, claiming to focus on results, equate accountability with a litany of test scores. At the other extreme are those who, despairing of all the variables outside school that affect student achievement, claim that accountability is futile and that, all things considered, teachers and administrators are doing about as well as can be expected. Each side accuses the other of failure to understand or, as the rhetorical wars escalate, care about children. *Holistic Accountability* offers a practical response to this challenge.

How You Can Use This Book

Educational accountability has traditionally been the province of state and district policymakers, and without question, legislators and board members

can influence accountability systems for the better if they take a broader view of the purpose and scope of educational accountability policies. Nevertheless, this book has a much wider audience than policymakers. Educators, administrators, school leaders, and parents can make an immediate and profound impact on educational accountability policies in individual schools through the use of the principles of holistic accountability. It is not necessary to have a change in state accountability policy for individual schools and classrooms to improve their focus on the causes of improved student achievement. You can use this book to change the agenda of the next meeting of your Parent-Teacher Association or School Accountability Committee from an isolated discussion of test scores to a broad and deep consideration of the antecedents of excellence. You can use this book to improve the quality of the test report you receive from the assessment office through the consideration of additional variables beyond test scores, ethnicity, and family economic status. You can use this book to improve the quality of your next staff development program so that the impact of specific teaching strategies, assessment practices, and curricula can be considered in a systematic manner. Indeed, you can use this book to avoid any prospective teaching technique that carries the intimation of “flavor of the month” rather than a substantive contribution to student learning. You can use this book to improve the dialogue between parents and teachers so that the focus of the discussion moves beyond test scores and student performance to include the underlying causes of student achievement.

Most important, you can use this book to challenge the insidious notion that ethnicity and family economic status are the primary variables influencing student achievement. When a school, district, or state is able to analyze systematically a number of factors related to student achievement, including the role of teachers, leaders, and policymakers, then it forces the adults in the system to take greater responsibility for the educational results of the children. Only with a consideration of all these factors will all stakeholders in the system stop blaming children and the demographic characteristics of their families and cease the endless generation of excuses that are the hallmarks of too many discussions of educational accountability. Holistic accountability is about using information to improve learning, teaching, and policy making. It is not about easy answers or facile excuses.

Keys to Holistic Accountability

There are four keys to building a holistic accountability system: structure, collaboration, implementation, and communication. The first three chapters introduce the basic structure and rationale for building a holistic accountability system. Effective leaders must first discuss the principles and vision that guide the creation of an accountability system before they proceed to ac-

countability methods. Chapter 4 deals with the imperative of community collaboration, embracing a variety of stakeholders in the creation of a meaningful and fair accountability system. Chapter 5 further builds the case for a collaborative approach to accountability, integrating accountability with previous work done in the vast majority of school systems on academic standards. If accountability is to be an enduring concept rather than just “one more program” that draws the inevitable sigh of contempt from veteran teachers and administrators, then it must be clear that the holistic accountability system will build on the strong foundations of academic standards and other effective strategies already in place in the schools. Chapters 6 and 7 address the details of implementation, providing a 10-step approach to implementing a holistic accountability system. The final key to holistic accountability is communication, the theme of Chapter 8.

Accountability is an evolving arena, fraught with danger but rife with opportunities for school leaders willing to approach it in a constructive manner. If you are willing to share your experiences on accountability matters, go to the web site of the International Center for Educational Accountability at www.edaccountability.org. You will find free downloads of articles and research on the subject of educational accountability. You can also share your experiences and ask questions of experts in the field.

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