Reframing Accountability for Urban Schools: Efforts from the Ground Up to Improve Public Education

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Introduction

Talk of accountability is pervasive in education policy-making in the current era, especially as it concerns urban schools. Discussion of accountability addresses the issue of what groups and individuals are to be held responsible for improving schools so that all children receive a high quality education. Accountability systems can be based on a variety of models. Policy researchers who have looked at accountability systems currently in use at district and state levels, the most visible forms of accountability, have pointed to both the benefits and problems that arise from the use of these systems. (Fuhrman, 1999; Goertz and Duffy, 2001). As the federal No Child Left Behind legislation ups the ante on high-stakes testing, practically the sole accountability measure in widespread use, it becomes increasingly important to look at current models of accountability to see whether they really address the essential issues of equity and building the capacity for schools to improve.

Between 1999-2004, Research for Action and the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform have collaborated on the Indicators Project on Education Organizing, a study of the work of community organizing groups working for school reform.[1] Through this study, we discovered

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[1] Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and Research for Action, *Successful Community Organizing for School Reform*, 2002). This study was a collaborative effort between the Cross City Campaign for Urban School reform, a nine-city network of school reform leaders, and Research for Action, an independent research group with a focus on the dynamics among parents, communities and schools.

We selected community organizing groups that share a set of characteristics: 1) working to change public schools to make them more equitable and effective for all students; 2) building a large base of members who take collective action to further their agendas; 3) creating relationships and collective responsibility by identifying shared concerns among neighborhood residents and creating alliances and coalitions that cross neighborhood and institutional boundaries; 4) developing leadership among community residents to carry out agendas that the membership determines through a democratic governance structure; and 5) using the strategies of adult education, civic participation, public action, and negotiation to build power for residents of low- to moderate-income communities. The case study groups, dispersed across the country, were all urban, but the sample was diverse in its

that accountability is at the center of community organizing's efforts to improve schools, but it is a conception of accountability that includes critical dimensions missing in the discourse of the dominant systems. Community organizing groups' work on accountability connects schools and community, broadens the range of actors who take direct responsibility, and uses a public deliberative process to solicit commitments from involved stakeholders and maintain pressure so that those commitments will be carried out.

The two predominant responses to the call for accountability in public education are bureaucratic and professional accountability, often seen as complementary. We argue that these two forms of accountability, even when combined, are limited in their influence on schools because they are built on the assumption that schools exist in isolation from the complex social and political contexts in which they function. In studying the contribution of community organizing groups to urban school reform, we found a form of accountability that includes these critical dimensions and adds value to the predominant models. We call this form "public" accountability.

Predominant Models

The model for accountability most commonly advocated in the systemic reform literature and reflected in state legislation and the federal No Child Left Behind act is bureaucratic accountability. Another form of accountability widely embraced as a strategy for creating positive school climate is professional accountability.

Bureaucratic accountability – External Demands

Bureaucratic accountability is the basis for the vast majority of formalized accountability systems under which public schools are currently operating. Some scholars have referred to the current form of bureaucratic accountability as the "new accountability," and see it as contrasting with older forms because it is outcomes-oriented rather than oriented to "inputs" or "procedures." (Fuhrman, 1999; O'Day, 2002) In the "new accountability," the school is the unit

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inclusion of groups that were both multi-issue and single-issue focus, independent and networked. Each group had been involved with education organizing long enough for its campaign to produce results.

The five case study groups are: Alliance Organizing Project (Philadelphia, PA), Austin Interfaith (Austin, TX), Logan Square Neighborhood Association (Chicago, IL), New York ACORN (New York, NY), and Oakland Community Organizations (Oakland, CA) A series of reports on this study are available through the Cross City website (www.crosscity.org) under the Indicators Project, "Strong Neighborhoods, Strong Schools" and titles are listed at the end of the paper.

of accountability, with teachers and principals responsible for making improvements.   In a bureaucratic accountability system, accountability is top-down; schools are accountable to the district, the state, or to the federal government (more so now than ever before, as the No Child Left Behind legislation imposes federally-mandated requirements and consequences.) In many cases, local districts have adopted accountability systems of their own – such as Chicago and Philadelphia in the middle-1990s. Even before No Child Left Behind, states designed and carried out accountability systems, with Kentucky, Texas and California having among the most elaborate. No Child Left Behind adds an additional layer and set of expectations.

In current accountability systems based on the bureaucratic model, student performance is measured by some type of standardized test and schools are held accountable for bringing scores up to a set minimum level. In these systems, the state or district adopts a set of learning "standards" that determine what content and level of mastery students should accomplish by particular grade levels. The accountability system includes rewards or sanctions for schools, and sometimes students and teachers, as motivators for improving student achievement.

Bureaucratic accountability is often referred to as high- stakes accountability because of the significant consequences that can result for schools, teachers, and students. Schools that do not perform at the required level must undergo review and intervention. Sometimes interventions bring additional funding, resources, or technical assistance in order to boost schools' capacity to meet high standards. In cases where schools exceed expectations, they might receive monetary rewards or some other form of recognition. Among the most severe kinds of intervention for a "failing" school is "reconstitution," in which the staff is completely replaced. Under NCLB, there is a series of increasingly serious consequences for schools that do not meet the criteria for "adequate yearly progress," from students being offered an exit strategy at early stages to "corrective action II" resulting in the possibility that the school would close altogether (Pennsylvania Public Education Partnership, 2004.) With test data available for public scrutiny, a school's performance is often publicized through the media or on a district website; this publicity can establish the school's reputation for failure or excellence. With a sullied reputation and loss of autonomy, schools may lose qualified staff.

Bureaucratic accountability is premised on the belief that, given the many rewards attending success and the possible negative consequences of failure to reach externally-determined standards, schools will have a strong incentive to measure up and will find a way to

do so. The key advantage of an outcomes-based bureaucratic form of accountability is in making information about school performance public. Ideally, this resource can be used to draw attention to a school's need, for example, to change practices in order to improve student performance or to variations across a system (or state) that reflect inequities. Making this data public can provide citizens with the information they need to bring pressure on a local school or district or even at the state level. Bureaucratic accountability systems can also be beneficial to schools when interventions for identified low-performing schools provide additional resources to those schools with the greatest need.

Among the problems with bureaucratic accountability are its reliance on external, imposed motivation and, as it is applied in current systems, the intense pressure it creates for teaching to the test (Fuhrman, 1999). In addition, current bureaucratic accountability systems rarely take into account the variation in schools' capacity to respond to performance expectations. In many cases, sanctions often do not include interventions or additional resources. In the current political climate, failure of public schools to meet accountability standards may be simply used as a rationale for privatization. By branding schools as "failure," high-stakes accountability systems without effective interventions put pressure on parents to leave the public school system. Those who see privatization in a positive light argue that a free market is a motivating force for school improvement. Those who critique this viewpoint see the push for privatization as undoing universal public education and redefining the state's obligation to its citizens (Katz, 2001; Labaree, 2000). In this approach, the state has defined the public as consumer rather than as participant in school improvement efforts.

Professional Accountability – Accountability from the Inside

Another approach to establishing accountability counters some of the disadvantages and limitations of bureaucratic accountability systems by holding the professional teaching community within a school responsible for improving student achievement. With this approach, professionals are accountable to each other. Professional accountability is based on standards for teaching that are reinforced by staff members working collaboratively, with a sense of collective responsibility for their students' achievement. Proponents of professional accountability have promoted national teacher certification (Darling-Hammond, 1990).

As with bureaucratic accountability, the school is the unit of accountability, since it is within schools that professional communities develop to support student learning. Strong professional accountability requires strong social ties among professionals inside the schools as well as connection to and practice applying a body of knowledge about professional standards established for the field. In this professional paradigm, a consequence of student failure is answering to one's peers for the reputation of the school, as based in student achievement.

Benefits of professional accountability are that it builds internal motivation and highlights the need for intensive investment in professional training and development to bring about the kinds of reforms necessary to make a difference at the classroom level. O'Day also points to the value of professional accountability in creating the capacity for schools to respond to standards- based testing.

Professional accountability has received attention in the literature in recent years, since such factors as collaboration among school staff, teachers' trust in each other, and their sense of collective responsibility for their work and students' learning have been shown to be associated with higher student achievement. (Bryk, et.al., 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Corcoran and Goertz, 1995).

The tremendous challenge of professional accountability is the difficulty of establishing a collaborative culture in contemporary urban school settings (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Corcoran and Goertz, 1995; Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994.) In addition, without input from external perspectives, teachers are not very likely to question established beliefs, practices, and school conditions that may be disadvantageous for their students.

The bureaucratic and professional models for accountability are not mutually exclusive. Policy researchers have suggested that, in order to improve schools, bureaucratic accountability models need to be combined with professional accountability. (O'Day, 2002.) The key contributions of professional accountability to school improvement are knowledge of effective practices and motivation. External accountability can strengthen internal accountability by bringing a focus on student achievement data and a wider system perspective, increasing expertise at the organizational level, and providing additional resources where needed. In essence, the "new" bureaucratic accountability brings discipline, while professional accountability, it is hoped, brings greater capacity to respond.

Are the Dominant Models of Accountability Sufficient?

Our research indicates that even when combined, bureaucratic and professional accountability are missing important dimensions that contribute to school improvement. Both models are too narrow because they arise from a view of schools as isolated institutions, so that responsibility for school improvement resides exclusively within the school. This perspective is extremely limiting, given the reality that schools actually function within a complex context involving parents and the local community, school district, city and state governments, institutions of higher education, and nonprofit agencies.

We have had the opportunity to observe the significant contributions that these outside players can make to urban school reform through an intensive study of the education work of community organizing groups. This collaborative study conducted by Research for Action with the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, included detailed case studies of the work of five community organizing groups; we draw on these case studies to illustrate a different model of accountability which we are designating "Public Accountability," (a phrase introduced by one community organizing group which effectively characterizes the work of all of the groups we studied.)
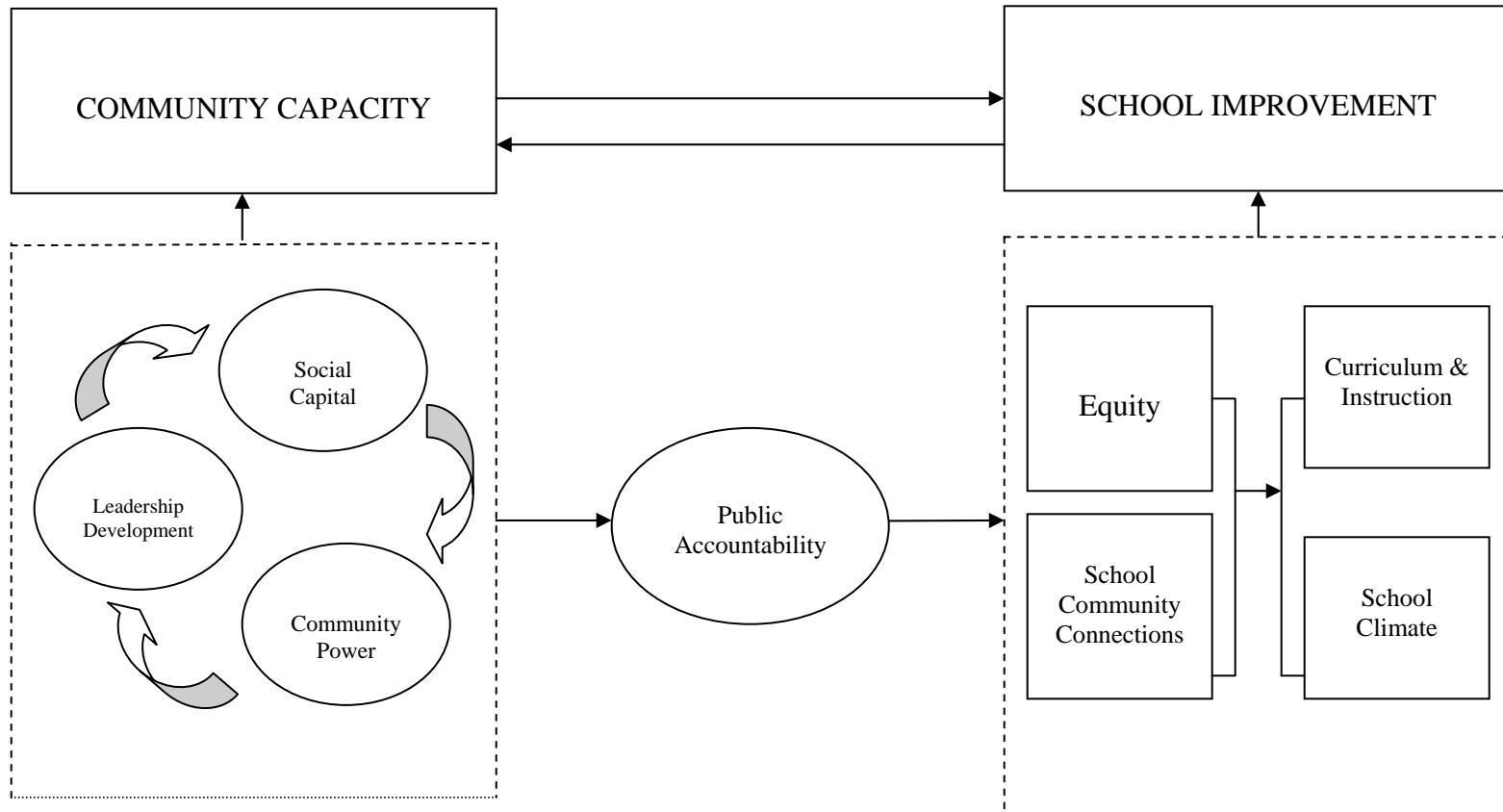
Theory of Change: Public Accountability as a Hinge between Community Capacity and School Improvement

During our research on community organizing for school reform, we gathered many stories, told to us by a range of public education stakeholders – including parents, organizers, teachers, administrators, elected officials, and school board members – that allowed us to understand from different perspectives the kinds of impacts the groups were having (Mitchell, 1984.) Our analysis of these stories showed that public accountability is a key element in the process through which community organizing groups contribute to school improvement.

Each of the predominant accountability models can make valuable contributions; community organizing can make use of data generated through other kinds of accountability systems, and classroom learning cannot improve without teacher commitment to reform. However, the theory of change behind community organizing links school improvement to the capacity of a community to bring together people from across constituencies – such as public officials and ordinary citizens – to engage in an open process where they set agendas and make

commitments. This is what we call public accountability, and it is the hinge to low income neighborhoods insuring that schools systems are both equitable and culturally responsive.

THEORY OF CHANGE: RELATIONSHIP OF COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

COMMUNITY CAPACITY

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Social Capital

Leadership Development

Community Power

Public Accountability

Equity

Curriculum & Instruction

School Community Connections

School Climate

Public accountability is the hinge that connects community capacity with school improvement. Increased community participation, strong relationships, and an organizational base recognized as an authentic voice of the community can bring diverse interests together and broaden accountability for improving public education for children of low-to moderate- income families. Public accountability is what generates the political will necessary to forward equity and school/community connections. Resulting improvements in school climate and curriculum and instruction help to make schools more equitable and responsive to the communities they serve. This lays the basis for improved student learning and achievement.

Strategies that community organizing groups use to achieve public accountability

Our study provides powerful examples and new lessons for how to build public accountability. Community organizing groups develop parent and community leadership, bolster social networks within and across communities and groups, and transform power relationships—all missing components in dominant conceptions of accountability. We identified four primary strategies that community organizing groups use for creating public accountability: creating public conversations, monitoring practices, programs and policies, increasing participation in the political arena, and building joint ownership and relational culture.

<u>Creating Public Conversations</u>

Public conversations bring the perspectives and shared concerns of parents and community to the attention of those who work with their children and who make education policy decisions. Community organizing groups identify shared concerns through multitudes of individual and small groups meetings. The process of bringing these concerns into public view helps to create momentum, pressure, and avenues for action.

One form of public conversation is the "accountability session." At these events, large numbers of a community organizing group's members turn out to let invited district and elected officials or candidates for office know their positions on important issues. In spring 2000, Austin Interfaith held an accountability session just prior to local school board elections. Over 650 Austin Interfaith members and other interested citizens

attended. When addressing the candidates, Austin Interfaith members raised issues such as inadequate support for Spanish-speaking students, the threat of increased school size resulting from plans for consolidation and school closings, inequities in funding across the district that made it difficult to attract and retain high quality staff in schools in low-income areas. They told personal stories to illustrate why these issues were important to them and their communities.

Candidates responded to yes/no questions related to each of the issues raised. Austin Interfaith calls this "pinning" the candidates; it keeps the focus on their commitments. The media reported on the candidates' responses, making their commitments a matter of public record.

Monitoring Practices, Programs and Policies

Another strategy to build public accountability involves identifying discrepancies between the stated objectives of a practice, program or policy and the actual experience of low-income students, pushing for changes that alter the injustices, and monitoring the results. Community organizing groups do this by conducting research and reviewing data that allows them to make judgments about the adequacy of programs and policies, the authenticity of improvement efforts and the credibility of results.

NY ACORN's campaign to win more equitable access for low-income and minority students to high quality academic programs is an example of monitoring. When two of NY ACORN members, one white and the other African American, discovered that officials at their neighborhood elementary school did not provide them with equivalent information about gifted programs, the organization began research into whether there was systemic discrimination in access to information about special programs. They published their findings in a series of "Secret Apartheid" reports, which documented discriminatory practices. In addition to publishing their findings, NY ACORN members made what they learned public through rallies, meetings with school district officials and gaining media coverage. The New York City School Chancellor publicly acknowledged the charges made in the ACORN reports, and responded by creating a policy for equal access to information and calling for a long overdue survey of special programs in the city. NY ACORN continued monitoring and reporting the results.

Increasing Participation in the Political Arena

Community organizing groups seek to influence those in positions of power and authority, in order to build the political will necessary to improve schools in low- and moderate-income areas. Their efforts counterbalance the influences on political leaders to ignore the problems of schools in low-income neighborhoods.

To exert their influence, the groups use a mix of confrontational and relationship building strategies. In the mid-1990s, the state legislature of California passed funding for new school facilities, but local school districts had to raise matching funds. The Oakland Unified School District floated a bond for new school construction in order to take advantage of the available state money. After scrutinizing the proposed bond, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) members rallied against it because it did not target school construction in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods where school overcrowding was severe, an issue that concerned its members and around which its local organizing committees had been working. Leaders from OCO conducted a campaign to educate people in their neighborhoods about the bond and its limitations. They also met one-on-one with their elected officials to explain their concern. The bond was rejected, and the media attributed its defeat to OCO's activity. Although OCO took a lot of heat for its role in having funds withheld from the district, the bond was rewritten to prioritize school construction in the neighborhoods where school overcrowding existed. OCO leaders again led a neighborhood education campaign and the bond passed.

Building Joint Ownership and Relational Culture

Community organizing groups have developed practices and processes for building joint ownership of children's education and a relational culture between parents and school personnel.

These practices include individual meetings, neighborhood walks and programmatic initiatives, such as parent run after school programs. With powerful community organizing groups behind them, parents gain legitimacy in their interactions with professional educators. Over time, new relations of respect develop as teachers and parents find themselves working together around mutual concerns. Developing a relational culture is critical for the participation of parents and professionals in joint problem solving.

Parents who were leaders in Chicago's Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) fought for and won new buildings and building renovations for overcrowded and deteriorating school facilities.   By the conclusion of the facilities campaign, many school professionals had gained respect for parents' perseverance and the political attention they drew to issues affecting the local schools. One principal, who was a member of LSNA, saw a Parent-Teacher Mentor program as a next step to deepening the relationship.

The Parent-Teacher Mentor program places parents in elementary school classrooms while providing leadership development and training in early childhood education. Initially only a handful of teachers in a few participating schools wanted parent mentors in their classroom, but now almost all teachers request them. The program has graduated over 900 parents and spread to seven schools. One important area of concern that teachers and parents took on together was school climate. Over the past six years, their joint efforts have led to a more intimate and respectful school environment, fewer disciplinary referrals, and improved student achievement.

Parent-teacher mentors often become leaders and co-decision-makers with school staff on local school councils, bilingual and other school committees, and sit on a community-wide Education Committee that takes charge of an annual planning process for neighborhood schools. The trust between parents and teachers built through the parent-teacher mentor program as well as the knowledge base and sense of self -efficacy the parent-teacher mentors gain through leadership training is the basis for this partnership. In this climate of joint ownership and relational culture, teachers and parents take collective responsibility and action to improve schools in Logan Square.

Public accountability: A new paradigm

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have drawn attention to issues of "civic engagement," "the public sphere," and "civil society." Though this research draws from a range of different intellectual traditions—including Tocqueville's description of 19th-century American democracy at work and Habermas' thoughts on the "bourgeois" public sphere—it shares an interest in the ways citizens come together, independently of the state, to deliberate, effect change, or simply build trust (e.g., Habermas, 2001; Calhoun, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999; Schofer & Fourcade-

Gourinchas, 2001). Scholars observe that a strong civil society—consisting of voluntary associations of all sorts—can serve as a key "check" on the power and responsiveness of government, enabling citizens to hold public institutions accountable and helping to shape their policies (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 1992). Others argue that a vibrant public sphere—defined by Habermas as an arena separate from the state in which individuals come together to create, through reasoned discourse, a common understanding (Habermas, 2001)—is critical to a functioning democracy (Taylor, 1995; see also, Calhoun, 1992). This body of literature generally accepts that the ways Americans engage with one another and the polity has changed over time in response to a host of social, political, and economic shifts.

Our research is consistent with that of Theda Skocpol and other "historical-institutionalists," who emphasize the important roles institutions—particularly the state—play in American civic life. According to Skocpol, civic participation exists in relation to the state and electoral politics (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999; Skocpol, 1992). Just as citizens, through interest groups and voluntary associations, affect the state, the structure of the state affects the ways these citizens are able to engage with it (Skocpol, 1992). As bureaucratic accountability has ascended in dominance, with its underlying theory of action based on a market model, the options for collective, associational engagement with schools have diminished. Citizens in this model act as individuals and see education as a private rather than public good (Labaree, 2000.) Public accountability as practiced by community organizing groups, represents a different theory, one in which schools serve a public good, that is, a collective interest rather than individual interests. It illustrates a type of engagement in which citizens come together with the expectation that they can participate in shaping the institution to improve it if they are unsatisfied, rather than leaving it.

Accountability that includes engagement of broad sectors of the public will be more important in the next few years than ever as mountains of data and information generated by standardized test results, ratings, and other performance reports are produced. Public accountability gives citizens a way to use this data not as an excuse to exit the public schools, but as a vehicle for improving them. Without the active and direct

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engagement of citizens in reshaping and helping to improve public schools, the institution will disappear bit by bit as citizens take the exit strategy rather than engagement.

David Labaree, drawing on Hirschman's book, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty,* illustrates what happens when the institution is oriented primarily to an exit option rather than towards an engagement, or "voice," option. He notes that it schools discourage engagement when they are primarily oriented around exit as the option. For public accountability to work, schools themselves must be reoriented to work on a paradigm that is open to engagement (Labaree, 2000.) Community organizing groups, with their strategies for public accountability, seek no less than to influence the very orientation of the institution of public schools.

This approach means that all stakeholders (not just educators or public officials) have a right and responsibility to take part in determining the goals and measures of success. Community organizing groups exercise the power of their numbers by insisting on commitments from public or school district officials and withdrawing their support if the commitments are not fulfilled. The interaction among different groups in the public sphere thus has the potential for both collaboration and confrontation.

Accountability, constructed in this way, is cross-sectoral and dynamic, requiring open, inclusive, and deliberative processes through which stakeholders can develop a sense of collective responsibility for school improvement, come to agreement on what the problems are, and commit to solutions.

Public Accountability – Added Value

With its assumption that schools and school improvement are embedded in a complex context rather than isolated and autonomous, and by representing the interests of low-income, minority, and immigrant communities, public accountability contributes important dimensions of school reform that are, at best, minimally addressed through bureaucratic and professional accountability systems.

The perspectives of parents and community members on what changes are necessary to improve student learning are not represented in accountability systems designed solely by educators and/or policy makers. Public accountability creates room for parent and community voices, which expands the factors considered and outcomes

expected. Parents and community members will often raise issues about safety, facilities, lack of respect for students and their families, bilingual education needs, decision-making processes – issues that from a parent and community point of view are central to their children's educational achievement. As Stone and others point out, in order for school reform to be sustained, the process of agenda setting has to be inclusive. Public accountability brings to the table the voices and interests of those most often left out of deliberations about school reform (Stone, 2004; Cuban and Usdan, 2003.)

Because groups that are left out with other accountability models -- parents and other local community members -- are involved in decision-making and have power, public accountability brings changes in priorities. Public accountability, as we observed it through the work of community organizing groups, increases the priority given to equity and school/community connections. Bureaucratic and professional accountability systems rarely create a motivation powerful enough to be effective in addressing equity issues without abandoning a vision of schools as a public good. Public accountability provides the vigilance from outside the system to maintain pressure for equity in areas such as the distribution of resources – books, high-quality teachers, etc. – to schools in low-income areas.

In addition, bureaucratic and professional accountability do not insure stability and sustainability of reform efforts. Any school reform effort occurs in a political context where changing priorities are the norm rather than the exception. The average tenure of a big city school superintendent is about two years, and the norm is for every new superintendent to bring in a new set of policies and programs. In contrast, parents and local communities have a long-term stake in the quality of local public schools; particularly in low-income urban areas, residents often live in an area and attend public schools there through multiple generations. Efforts to organize for school and community improvement can be sustained because the issues are so vital to the quality of families' lives.

Often, classroom-level improvement in urban schools is limited by the frequently held belief that low-income, minority children cannot meet demanding standards. Changing this belief is fundamental to educators' success in altering current achievement patterns. Although equity is the ostensible premise of NCLB, accountability systems in

which educators are isolated from parents and community members, true of both bureaucratic and professional models, have little built-in motivation or resources to change this norm. Indeed, some have pointed out that NCLB has the potential to increase inequity. However, community organizing groups showed that through public accountability, which engages parents and community with schools, educators see the engagement and concern of parents and each has a chance to communicate their expectations for supporting children to the other. Through this direct interaction with parents and community residents, teachers gain higher expectations for children's achievement.

Challenges to Realizing Public Accountability

Creating public accountability is important, because it adds dimensions that are critical for school improvement: connecting schools and community, broadening the range of actors who take direct responsibility, and using a public process to solicit commitments from involved stakeholders and maintain pressure so that those commitments will be carried out. However, realizing public accountability is not easy, because it requires fundamental change in many of the existing assumptions on which bureaucratic and professional accountability are based. Challenges to achieving public accountability include the following:

1. Public accountability bucks the last decades' policy trend towards greater privatization and promotion of individual responsibility. The assumption inherent in public accountability is that education is a public good and preserving it as such is a collective responsibility.
2. Public accountability requires a shift in the deeply held view that schools and communities are separate domains and that any relationship between them, to the extent that it exists, should be directed by education professionals.
3. Public accountability confronts persistent and pervasive stereotypes about poverty and residents of poor neighborhoods about family disorganization and parents' lack of concern for their children's school performance.

4. Public accountability posits that parents and community residents (as well as organized students) can work collectively to bring about changes in programs and policies that will help schools meet the aspirations and need of low-income families. This challenges the prevalent conception of parent involvement as motivated by a desire to benefit one's own child and will not lead to fundamental policy changes.

5. Public accountability is not the kind of program that can be mandated, funded, and turned over to hired personnel to carry out. The work of maintaining community involvement requires constant renewal through community organizers' work.

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