

# From Authentic Assessment to Authentic Accountability

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*It is Monday evening of American Education Week, The Superintendent of Schools rises to speak, and looks at her audience. She sees the Mayor and City Council; She sees business, community, religious and educational leaders; She sees students and teachers. She begins her address: a State of the District address that synthesizes all available data describing the performance of the schools and the reasons for that performance. She articulates priorities, immediate and long-term goals, and specifies the course of action that will realize those goals. When she finishes, a panel (business and community leaders, educators and policymakers) responds to what they have heard. Fully prepared in advance with all available data, they offer their own interpretations, alternative views regarding priorities and needs. Thus, is initiated a process designed to foster consensus about goals, intents, and actions -- and commitment to and mutual support for them as well.*

*There's more. In the days that follow, each individual school initiates a similar activity, addressing its immediate constituents (parents and community members) in a school accountability event. In doing so, they initiate an ongoing process that extends throughout the year. It is a process adapted from business applications of continuous improvement models and proceeds through three distinct phases that span the school calendar. First, there is **Discovery** (late summer/early fall), wherein data are explored and tentative judgments about performance, priorities, and programmatic responses are formulated. Next comes **Ratification** (winter/spring), in which those preliminary judgments are confirmed, and proposed actions affirmed and initiated. Then comes **Renewal** (spring/summer), in which new data requirements (attending new programs and initiatives) are established. The stage is set for ongoing monitoring of actions taken and their consequences.*

*With this, the accountability process begins anew. All of these steps, indeed the entire process, is defined and pursued as an open and public engagement and suggests a form of accountability the primary purpose of which is to contribute to improvement of performance. Nonetheless, it can have very serious consequences, rewards and sanctions. However, it does so in a way that is not exclusively focused on whether numbers go up or down. Instead, it calls upon our educational leaders to demonstrate that they can see clearly and honestly face what the data have to say; assess needs and priorities adequately; formulate appropriate responses to those needs; carry through on agreed upon intentions and plans; evaluate the impact of their actions; plan anew. These constitute absolutely appropriate grounds upon which to judge the service of educational professionals.*

This approach to accountability represents a radical departure from old models that presume that the publication of test scores are sufficient to influence (even improve) the performance of the schools. It is an approach that shifts focus from gathering and reporting data to interpreting and using them to improve the schools. There is no mistaking the importance of bona fide accountability to monitor or challenge for high performance from our schools. Many (educational leaders as well as policy makers, business leaders, and community members) have pointed to accountability as a powerful tool for assuring the performance of schools. For some, that is the underlying motive behind efforts to change the forms of assessment in use. However, treating the matter as a purely technical one dealing exclusively with forms of assessment is inadequate. Any assessment (however progressive) that is used in traditional ways is likely to have similar effects. School accountability has been promised many times in the past. Handling it no differently than ever before is likely to have little effect upon the education system -- no matter how enlightened the assessments in use might be. We need to move from traditional to authentic forms of accountability in the same way that we are trying to encourage more authentic forms of assessment.

To bring to life this vision of accountability as positive force for the improvement of the schools requires many shifts. We must change our sense of its Purpose, the Evidentiary Basis on which it is founded, and the Processes through which it is pursued. A sense of what this all means is helpful.

#### **Purpose: Accounting versus Accountability**

First, a distinction must be made between accounting and accountability. Accounting refers to the acts of gathering, organizing, and making available for use any of a variety of information describing the performance of the system. Accountability takes that information and uses it to inform judgments about performance and how it can be improved -- including planning and action. The distinction is necessary because there currently is much activity that is suggested as accountability when it is no more (and no more challenging) than accounting. Moreover, there is a lot of public accounting (such as annual media events about student achievement) that does not serve well because no one has thought about the evidence or the processes that can profitably inform a challenging and effective accountability. Unhappily, more often than not, when someone promises accountability they intend merely to give a test and publish the results -- at best a disappointing instance of accounting.

To realize the full power of accountability incentives we must approach accountability itself as a process of continuous and public engagement, one that challenges the system first to reveal its performance and then to explore the causes and antecedents of that performance -- all for the purpose of determining needs, priorities and actions. The goal is to involve various constituencies in the construction of deep and commonly held understandings about the performance of the system, the reasons for that performance, the best possible ways of improving performance, and the responsibilities of each in doing so. To make of accountability a process with a positive impact upon the system requires this shift in our sense of purpose. To borrow from the Japanese: The point of accountability must be to fix the problem not the blame.

### **What data: The evidentiary basis for accountability**

Serious consideration of the form of accountability alluded to above suggests certain qualities for the evidence upon which it can be based. A simple guiding principal emerges: the purpose is to engage and inform a discussion and its participants -- not to foreclose upon one. This suggests that certain qualities are essential for the data:

**Intuitively meaningful** -- Data that can profitably drive genuine accountability must be understandable and meaningful to all participants (including most especially parents, community members, and business leaders). The abstractions of measurement and obfuscations of statistical analyses do little to promote intuitive understanding or meaningful engagement of a broad public. Much data that are intuitively meaningful are available or can be developed. They are essential to support genuine accountability.

**Contextualized** -- Data that inform genuine accountability must be more extensive than simple outcome measures alone. They must include data that describe context and conditions, suggest causes, and describe educational processes. Those practices themselves are precisely what must be challenged and improved if the system is to perform any better. It is essential that descriptions of educational practices of schools be incorporated into the accountability process.

**Enriched** -- The urge to simplify or reduce data to indicators or statistical composites is very powerful. However, the consequence of doing so is clear: simple pronouncements about success or failure rather than deep discussions about causes and improvement. To fully support discussion about performance, the data must be enriched, not reduced.

**Information infrastructures** -- Finally, widespread engagement in public accountability is greatly enhanced by access to relevant data. There is a need for comprehensive information systems that are widely available and easily accessed and used. This is important if accountability is to be profitably informed by high quality data that are accurate, precise, reliable, timely, and meaningful. Currently, public accountability reflects the data (and data systems) upon which it is based producing discussions that tend to be modular and episodic. First, attention is given to student

achievement (following the release of achievement data), then attention focuses on drop-outs (following the release of drop-out data) then attention is paid to attendance (following the release of attendance data). Things are treated in this way as though any one of these discussion made any sense absent the others. Both the data structures and the processes designed to explore them must promote comprehensive and integrated accountability if they are to profitably inform the improvement of the system.

### **For whom and how: The process of accountability**

It is important to recognize that this kind of accountability suggests a process of public engagement rather than the mere issue of a report. Approaching accountability as an ongoing process of public engagement moves us from accountability reports to accountability events. It also suggests the use of a number of powerful tools developed and used in other sections of public discourse. There are many innovative possibilities: interpretative panels, town meetings, public debates, consensus building processes, even facilitated public dialogues that have been used effectively in other areas of socially contentious debate.

One particularly promising approach is what is termed quality review processes. These panels (some confined to educational professionals others more broadly defined to include the public) encourage schools' self study coupled with external critique and review. Quality Review Teams can be vested with the authority to make accountability judgments about performance, or they can be incorporated as another valuable source of information describing school performance and its consequences. What is significant is that here accountability is defined as an exercise of human judgment -- at best well informed and well considered judgment. If there are consequences to be invoked (rewards or sanctions) those consequences are best triggered by humans with deep understandings of a schools' contexts and conditions. Only well informed human judges can accommodate the complexity of a given circumstance and render fair and adequate judgment. This stands in sharp contrast to those who would build mechanical or statistical systems to singularly determine rewards or sanctions.

Authentic accountability would redefine the lines of responsibility from that which is currently the case. Currently, the blame game travels quickly up and down (but entirely within) the education system. Teachers seek to satisfy principals; principals seek to satisfy central office administrators; administrators seek to satisfy superintendents; and once a year superintendents face the microphones in a typically unpleasant event. Approached in this new way, accountability promotes direct engagement between those who are responsible to each other. Teachers to their students and parents; schools to their parents and neighborhoods; districts to their communities and so on.

The accountability event should convene all those whose understanding about the performance of schools we seek to facilitate and whose contributions are necessary to their improvement. This will include both those who are internal to the school (without whom there is little hope of deep understanding of the data examined) as well as those who are external to the system (without whom important perspective and appropriate challenges might not be realized). This form of accountability shatters old forms in one final and important way.

Because it is a public and open process aimed at continuous improvement, it no longer requires the system to monitor itself and then to justify that accounting to an often rightly suspicious public. The most radical and contentious of reform ideas are pursued not just because of low performance on the part of the system. They are pursued because that low performance is coupled with an absence of confidence that the system can be trusted to improve its performance. This approach restores that trust. It does so not just because the public can see how the system is doing but because the public is welcomed to understand and shape what the system is doing. Our experience with this form of accountability illustrates this point.

In one exceptional student-centered school, the Wai'alaie Elementary School in Honolulu, the school engages its community in accountability events very much in this image. The courage of the school and the efforts of its community have been exceptional. The rewards have been great. Data obtained from the participants and community members suggest that in their view, bona fide accountability concerns are addressed. One parent and community member responded to the first such event with a letter, saying, in part "Today I realized that my children's attendance at Wai'alaie is also an honor. . . . When we discussed accountability today, I was reminded that we are all accountable to each other. . . . it is only as a team that we can begin to meet the needs of all our children." This parent not only expresses a trust in the school but also a commitment to the only course that can provide the quality of education that we want for our children. That trust and that commitment stem from her encounter with accountability defined in this way.

### Concluding Thoughts

This view of accountability derives much from the business community and its demonstrated success in applying continuous improvement approaches to evaluate and refine processes. It is also consonant with standards-based reform and the powerful forces toward democratic localism (charter schools, site-based management, restructuring, etc.) that are being explored throughout the education system. Efforts to approach accountability in this way have revealed some of its challenges and problems. Three must be identified as paramount concerns.

The first challenge is the effort required to bring this vision to life. Extensive processes must be designed and seriously engaged. This requires more effort of all parties (particularly the public) than is represented in simple reports of student achievement. It is time

consuming to become fully informed about the performance of the schools and to engage in their evaluation and direction setting. It can also be seen as a necessary aspect of an informed and responsible citizenry.

A second challenge of this approach to accountability is the courage that it requires of all who initiate it. It requires courage on the part of policy leaders and the public to recognize that bona fide accountability concerns, indeed even the improvement of the system, can be addressed in so dramatically different a way. It also requires courage on the part of the education establishment that would be compelled to reveal itself and to account for its actions more completely and more publicly than ever before. In this regard, this form of public accountability represents a more critically honest examination of the performance of the system.

Once the necessary courage and effort are summoned, the third concern will become apparent. All participants will be asked to perform in ways that will challenge their capacities. This approach to accountability requires capacities for public relations outreach, data collection, analysis and use, as well as effective communication and group process skills, including conflict resolution. The development of such skills and capacities must be designed into the effort to transform accountability in this way.

With these challenges come promise. This approach expands local participation in schooling. In that sense it is consonant with other elements of standards-based reform that prize local empowerment. This form of accountability also promotes a culture of honesty, of data use, and of continuous improvement. Finally, because it promotes more widespread and deeper understanding of schools' performance and the reasons for it, it represents a fair yet more critically challenging accountability than traditional forms have provided.

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## An Accountability Event for Assessing and Directing the Performance of Public Education Institutions

A model developed by: Paul G. LeMahieu and Marina A. Piscalish

### **Purpose:**

To engage the public in a process that seeks to develop deep understandings of the performance of the school system, its causes and antecedents, so that a constructive course for improvement can be determined and undertaken and ultimately assessed.

### **Objectives:**

- To provide support for improving what happens for students in schools;
- To provide understanding of the performance of system that is contextualized to the local setting; and,
- To expand the number and types of individuals involved in making meaning of the present performance and future needs of the school.

### **Desired Characteristics of a Constructive Accountability Event:**

1. It should pursue answers to questions that are genuinely meaningful and important to the participants;
2. It should be based upon information and data that are intuitively understandable to participants;
3. It should actively involve participants in a process that weaves together the perspectives of those internal and external to the school;
4. It should produce processes and products that can be extended beyond the event and its immediate participants in order to achieve broader understanding, involvement and collective effort;
5. It should engage participants in a manner that permits judgments about the relevance of the data and the veracity of interpretations and conclusions drawn regarding the schools' performance.

<b>Discovery: Identifying Questions and Preliminary Answers</b>		
Jan-Feb	6 hours	20-35 participants
<p>The Discovery Phase involves a group representative of key internal and external constituent perspectives who will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• interpret survey results from fellow constituents regarding their interests;</li> <li>• identify the collective interests of the total group regarding accountability for the system;</li> <li>• articulate those questions needing answers regarding the system's performance;</li> <li>• develop an understanding the nature and appropriateness of the information available for exploring those interests; and,</li> <li>• answer the identified questions regarding the system's performance using available data.</li> </ul>		
<b>Ratification: Public Review and Endorsement</b>		
Apr-May	6 hours	35-100 participants
<p>The Ratification Phase will involve a group representative of key internal and external constituent perspectives who will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assess the quality of the work and the veracity of the answers regarding the schools' performance developed in the discovery phase;</li> <li>• articulate alternative interpretations of the data and refine answers to the questions developed in the Discovery Phase;</li> <li>• identify questions that remain and interests or needs for accountability that are still unmet;</li> <li>• deliver a charge to the school for continuous improvement; and,</li> <li>• deliver a charge to the community for supporting the continuous improvement of the school.</li> </ul>		
<b>Renewal: Follow-through and Looking Ahead</b>		
June	3 hours	10-20 participants
<p>The Renewal Phase will involve a group representative of key internal and external constituent perspectives who will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• distill the conditions identified in the Ratification Phase as enabling success;</li> <li>• develop a proposal for gathering and organizing data necessary for addressing unanswered questions; and,</li> <li>• propose changes for the subsequent year's accountability event.</li> </ul>		

## Proposed Design for Phase I

1. Determine all necessary stakeholder groups, invite and secure participation of key individuals.
2. Define and articulate charge to the group.
3. Articulate the expectations for the schools' performance held by each group, captured in the form of a question that begins with "How can we determine the extent to which...."

This will be done by holding focus groups to gather data on the interests or needs that each group has regarding the purpose of schooling and therefore, the expectations they have of the school. These focus group discussions should be recorded and transcribed. Data from the focus groups will be translated into scripted vignettes of conversations that capture the groups interests. The vignettes should build the case for the central question posed by the group. These scripted vignettes will be used in Phase II.

4. Present all data available for informing the central questions posed by the groups, and seek participant comment and endorsement regarding the quality of the information.

This will be done by having those responsible for gathering, organizing and preparing data for dissemination review with participants all information available for use in this process and instructions on how it can be read. Participants are then invited to ask questions regarding data gathering, analysis and reporting, and render judgments about its veracity and limitations

5. Form work groups around the central questions.

This will be done by presenting the individual stakeholder groups' central questions to all participants. Then, individuals from across stakeholder groups can self-select into work groups based upon where they would like to invest their efforts at determining answers using the available data.

6. Work groups develop a plan for using the information available for answering their central question.

This will be done by providing each group with a data expert and a process facilitator. The data expert assists the group in understanding all information available for informing their question. The process facilitator helps the group : 1) develop a plan for answering their question; 2) ensure fair and inclusive participation; and, 3) record its own process (or answer-path) and preliminary conclusions.

7. Work groups reconvene as a large group to evaluate individual groups' efforts and preliminary answers to the central questions.

Work groups present their guiding question, as well as the answer path or process used for answering the question. At this time they also identify the questions still remaining, and the data needed to answer remaining questions.

8. A representative group from Phase I commits to participating in the design and implementation of Phase II.

## Proposed Design for Phase II

1. Deliver charge to the group.

2. Large group presentation of work processes and accomplishments of Phase I.

This will begin with dramatic portrayals of scripted vignettes developed from focus group conversations that motivated and defined the key questions pursued in Phase I. Once the guiding questions are presented to the group, each Phase I group will briefly describe their process for answering the question, and the data upon which their answers are based.

3. Present all data available for informing the central questions posed by the groups, and seek participant comment and endorsement regarding the quality and adequacy of the information.

This will be done by having those responsible for gathering, organizing and preparing data for dissemination review with participants all information available for use in this process and instructions on how it can be read. Participants from Phase I will be invited to speak about their reflections and judgments regarding the quality and adequacy of the data available in this process. Phase II participants are then invited to ask questions regarding data gathering, analysis and reporting, and render judgments about its veracity and adequacy.

4. Form work groups around the central questions developed in Phase I.

This will be done by presenting the individual stakeholder groups' central questions to all participants. Then, individuals from across stakeholder groups can self-select into work groups based upon where they would like to invest their efforts at refining and verifying Phase I conclusions.

## Proposed Design for Phase III

1. Deliver charge to the group.

2. The group reflects upon the adequacy of its membership in terms of representativeness of various stakeholder groups, expert knowledge regarding data gathering, analysis and reporting and group process expertise. It invites and secures necessary participation and support functions.

3. Development of a plan for securing information regarding the schools' ongoing and expanded support of conditions that enable improved practice, reflected in the charge to the school resulting from Phase II.

4. Development of a plan for securing data capable of informing those questions not adequately answered in Phase II.

5. Planning and preparation for the continuous improvement of the subsequent year's accountability event.