No Child Left Behind?

The Politics and Practice of School Accountability

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Politics, Control, and the Future of School Accountability

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Over the last ten years or so, the movement for school accountability has taken the nation by storm. Its message is a simple one. The public schools should have strong academic standards; tests should be administered to determine what students are learning; and students, as well as the adults responsible for teaching them, should be held accountable for meeting the standards.

This message is an easy sell, especially during a time when improving the public schools is a national priority. So there can be little surprise that reformers pressing for school accountability have found a receptive audience in the American public, and little surprise that policymakers have fallen all over themselves to endorse accountability as a key means of promoting better schools.

In state after state, governments have imposed new curriculum standards, new tests aligned to the standards, new requirements for promotion and graduation, new rules for ranking schools and publicizing test scores, and new systems of rewards and sanctions. And the action is not just at the state level. President Bill Clinton seized on the accountability issue in framing a federal education agenda through the Goals 2000 program, national standards, and national teacher certification. And President George W. Bush, a Republican not otherwise given to federal intervention, followed up by making his No Child Left Behind legislation a centerpiece of his domestic program—imposing, for the first time, a national accountability system of annual testing and performance-based rewards and sanctions.

Accountability is clearly an issue with legs. But can it take us where we want to go? The presumption of the accountability movement is that it can. Yet this is just a presumption backed by common sense, and a thin reed on which to hang billions of dollars' worth of reforms, not to mention the nation's educational future.

So what should we expect from this effort to improve the schools by holding them accountable for their performance? The issue is complicated, and I don't pretend to have all the answers. But I do think there is much to be gained by looking beyond the complexities (or at least not getting distracted by them) and focusing on simple fundamentals. Two are particularly important. The first is that school accountability is an exercise in top-down control. The second is that it is a product of democratic politics. I believe it is mainly by exploring these two basic dimensions of the issue, and by recognizing the distinctive problems associated with each, that we can learn what to expect from school accountability. And whether it can take us where we want to go.

The Problem of Control

The movement for school accountability is essentially a movement for more effective top-down control of the schools. The idea is that, if public authorities want to promote student achievement, they need to adopt organizational control mechanisms—tests, school report cards, rewards and sanctions, and the like—designed to get district officials, principals, teachers, and students to change their behavior in productive ways.

As a general matter, there is nothing unusual about this. Virtually all organizations need to engage in top-down control, because the people at the top have goals they want the people at the bottom to pursue, and something has to be done to bring about the desired behaviors. The public school system is just like other organizations in this respect, and top-down control is routinely exercised with respect to all manner of educational policies, programs, and directives day in and day out. The only thing different about today's accountability movement is that the political authorities are putting the emphasis on student achievement—which they had not done before—and on control mechanisms designed to bring it about.

Principals, Agents, and the Logic of Control

When political scientists and economists think about issues of control (and institutions generally), they usually rely on economic theories of organiza-
tion, ranging from agency theory to transaction cost economics to information economics to the economics of personnel. Much of this literature is technical and specialized. But its basic ideas are simple, having to do with incentives and information, and they offer useful guidance in thinking about school accountability.

For heuristic purposes, I will frame my discussion with reference to the classic agency model. This model is built around a principal-agent relationship, in which a principal who wants to attain certain goals hires an agent to act on his behalf. This kind of relationship is ubiquitous throughout society. People hire doctors to treat their health problems and mechanics to fix their cars. Employers hire workers to manufacture their products. Legislatures hire public bureaucrats to carry out governmental programs. States hire administrators and teachers to educate children.

As these examples suggest, principal-agent relationships are common because they are beneficial and necessary. Principals of all kinds lack the time or capacity to do everything for themselves. And often their agents have expertise that enables them to do a far better job of pursuing the principals' goals than the principals themselves could do.

There is also a downside to these relationships, however, owing to two basic problems. The first is that the agent inevitably has his own interests—in income, career, leisure, family, ideology, policy, or whatever—that tug him in other directions and give him incentives not to pursue the principal's goals with efficiency and dedication. The second is that the agent tends to have information that the principal does not have. The latter stands to be poorly informed, for instance, about how the agent performs on the job, because many of his actions may not be observable with much precision. Moreover, the principal may have a hard time observing what type of agent he is dealing with—low ability or high ability, lazy or hardworking, trustworthy or not—and cannot readily determine whom to hire, fire, or depend upon.

These information asymmetries put the principal at a disadvantage. It is not just that he does not know certain things about the agent's type or behavior, which is bad enough. It is also that the agent does know these things and can use this private information to his advantage—allowing him (if he wants) to slack off in pursuit of the principal's goals and substitute his own interests in the performance of his job, all the while giving the appearance of being a good agent.

This sets up the basic control problem. What can the principal do, given the problems inherent in their relationship, to get the agent to work as efficiently as possible toward the right goals? The precise solution, not surprisingly, can vary depending on the circumstances. But it generally involves

- the measurement of agent performance;
- the use of screening and signaling devices to reveal information about agent type; and
- the design of compensation schemes, usually involving pay for performance, that brings the agent's interests into alignment with the principal's and gives him incentives to be productive.

In the real world of government and business, these control mechanisms will not work perfectly, and there may be a great deal of slippage between what superiors want and what agents actually do. Indeed, even if the mechanisms are reasonably effective, the simple fact that they are costly to design and enforce means that superiors will have incentives to use them only up to the point at which the costs begin to outweigh the benefits of compliance, allowing some and perhaps a great deal of noncompliant behavior to continue unabated. At some point, noncompliance becomes too expensive to deal with.

In short, then, while there are clearly things the principal can do to get agents to work productively on his behalf, control is imperfect and noncompliance is to be expected. The fact is that his agents have interests that are different from his, they have critical information that he does not have, and he can do only so much to overcome these problems.

**School Accountability as a Control Problem**

Now let's put this framework to use in gaining perspective on school accountability. State and federal authorities are the principals, whose goal (we'll assume for now) is to promote student achievement and better schools. Their agents are the school administrators and teachers, who actually do the educating. Students might be considered agents, too, but I want to focus here on the people who run the schools.

What motivates these people? The answer varies from person to person, but it is a sure bet that teachers and other school personnel—however much they care about children and however public-spirited they may be—have value structures that reach well beyond the goals of the public school system. Like other employees throughout the economy, they care about their own incomes and careers, security, leisure, family, professional norms, and a host of other things. And these values will inevitably come into conflict with what the authorities want them to do, giving them incentives to avoid full compliance. This does not happen because they are bad people. It happens because they are normal people, people whose interests do not line up perfectly with the goals of their superiors.

This said, there are good reasons for thinking that the motivation for noncompliance is especially strong in public education. The fact is, the authori-
ties are faced with a school system that has been in existence for about a century now but has never really been held accountable for student achievement. This long-standing lack of accountability is heavily reflected in the modern structure. With few exceptions, for instance, there is no connection between how much students learn and how much anyone gets paid. Lousy teachers get paid just as much as terrific teachers, and bureaucrats get their salaries whether they promote student achievement or not. Virtually all these jobs are highly secure, and school employees do not have to worry about losing them if they happen to be bad at what they do. Teachers, who of all employees have the greatest influence on student learning, are so heavily protected by civil service and union rules that those who are mediocre or even incompetent are almost never removed from their jobs.

The existing system is also built around delegation to experts. From the early 1900s on, educational leaders worked hard to convince political authorities and the general public that education is a highly technical business that needs to be put in expert hands—their own hands—if it is to be carried out effectively. This strategy worked well, and throughout the last century the authorities have relied heavily on administrators to guide them on matters of education policy and operation. While modern times have produced an avalanche of federal and state programs—and rules—that constrain local autonomy, the tradition of deference to experts remains strong. The belief among administrators is that they should be able to carry out their work as they see fit. And a variation on the same theme is embraced by teachers, who want to be regarded as professionals and who want their own expertise respected and deferred to.

As political authorities attempt to bring accountability to the public schools, then, they encounter a workplace filled with agents who have had their expectations and values shaped by the existing system—in which they have substantial autonomy, their pay and jobs are secure, and they are not held accountable for their performance. Indeed, it is likely that these properties were part of what attracted many of them to the education system in the first place, and that those who have stayed for more than several years (instead of leaving for other careers) are people who have found these properties particularly to their liking.

This is an important point, and it needs to be followed up by another that, while uncomfortable for educators to face up to, needs to be recognized in any objective analysis. The follow-up point is that the public school system may suffer from a serious problem of adverse selection—namely, that its job characteristics have not only attracted certain types of people to work for the school system, but have actually attracted the wrong types and repelled the right types. It is an established result in the economics of personnel, for example, that an organization that does not reward productive performance will be especially attractive to workers who are less productive (less able, less hardworking), while the more productive workers will seek out opportunities elsewhere, in organizations that recognize their worth and reward them for it. By the same logic, an organization that gives its workers complete job security—in exchange, say, for less pay than they might earn elsewhere—will tend to attract workers who are highly risk-averse and security-conscious, while workers who are more open to risk (because they are more talented or confident or ambitious or innovative) will often find other opportunities more attractive. Thus, to the extent that these forces have been operating within the public school system—and it is difficult to believe they haven’t been—the current system is probably filled with teachers and administrators who are the wrong types.

I suspect the adverse selection problem is serious and creates major obstacles to reform. But even if it were not, reformers are still likely to meet with stiff resistance. For even if everyone agrees that student achievement is a laudable goal, the agents clearly have other values that are important to them as well—values nurtured by the current system—and these values are deeply threatened by an accountability reform that erodes their autonomy, shakes up their comfortable arrangements for jobs and pay, and demands that they work differently, work harder, and produce more. Such changes will not be welcome.

Resistance is likely to be all the stronger because teachers, the most numerous and important of all school employees, are represented by powerful unions dedicated to the protection of teacher interests (and union interests as well). Other employees are similarly represented by unions and professional associations. As a result, the resistance of employees to top-down control does not simply arise from the separate, uncoordinated responses of individuals. It also arises from the organized activities of powerful groups: which, like their members, see most aspects of school accountability as undesirable and threatening.

The prospects for control look still worse when we recognize that, as in the classic principal-agent model, there is an information asymmetry here that works to the disadvantage of the authorities. The key factors of interest—how much students are learning, how productive teachers are—are difficult for the authorities to observe, and the administrators and teachers who run the schools have far better information on these scores. They are also repositories of expertise on everything from curriculum to teaching methods to school organization, which are matters the authorities need to understand to make wise decisions.
So, as even these simple considerations suggest, the authorities are up against a control problem of formidable proportions. They do not know how to produce student achievement, nor do they necessarily know student achievement when they see it. But they must try to design a control structure that gets a resistant group of employees to apply their expertise in all the right ways to generate the desired outcomes. Over the last decade, the authorities have sought to do this through regimes of standards, tests, and rewards and sanctions. They are fighting an uphill battle, though, and their prospects for success are not bright.

The basic reasons are already apparent, but let me tie them more specifically to the key components of an accountability system.

STANDARDS. The authorities may want to promote student learning, but what the precise content of that learning should be is unclear (even to experts). It follows that standard setting—the task of measuring the authorities' goals—is hardly an objective process even for well-defined subjects like math and science, not to mention subjects like history and social studies, in which experts regularly go to war over what content is important and how it should be interpreted.9

By fiat or compromise, reasonable standards can be settled upon. But there is nothing definitive about them; and because this is so, children may fail according to one set of standards and succeed according to another. So have they succeeded or failed? And have their teachers succeeded or failed in teaching them? These sorts of ambiguities, pervading as they do the very foundations of the accountability system, can only breed trouble for the exercise of control. And they invite manipulation by those with incentives to resist.

TESTS. The next step is to devise tests that measure how well students are meeting the standards. Specialists have been working since the early 1900s on the technology of testing, and a great deal is known about how to do it well. The most familiar objections—that multiple-choice tests cannot measure what students know, that tests are culturally biased—are exaggerated. Many other objections, moreover, are not criticisms of testing per se. Sometimes they are complaints that the wrong kinds of tests are being used (for example, nationally normed achievement tests rather than tests geared to state standards). Sometimes they are complaints that the underlying standards are too vague or do not take into account the full range of important things that schools do. And sometimes they are complaints about how tests are linked to rewards and sanctions. These legitimate issues make accountability more difficult. But they give no reason to think that standardized tests cannot provide useful measures of student achievement.10

This said, a flaw in the conventional testing process threatens the validity of the entire enterprise. This is that tests are routinely administered by teachers and local administrators, the very people (aside from students) whose performance is being measured. They have incentives to cheat, and their traditional autonomy in school affairs gives them ample opportunity to do so: by previewing the exams, by feeding kids answers, by doctoring answer sheets, by keeping low-scoring students from taking the exams, and so on. Until the testing process is placed in independent hands, the tests will be subject to self-serving manipulation and their value for accountability undermined.11

CONSEQUENCES. While measurement is hardly straightforward, the most serious problems do not arise from measurement itself. They arise from attempts to use the resulting measures (standards, tests) to evaluate school personnel and attach consequences to their behavior. For most organizations, there are two purposes for doing this sort of thing. One is that it provides a basis for hiring productive employees and weeding out or retraining unproductive ones. The other is that it provides employees with incentives to do a good job.12 Accountability systems are likely to prove disappointing, however, on both counts.

For starters, the authorities inherit a population of agents whose values and expectations have been shaped by the existing system's guaranteed security and lack of emphasis on performance—and for the foreseeable future, they are stuck with these people. Even if the accountability system produced excellent measures of performance that allowed low-productivity workers to be identified, tenure and unions would prevent the authorities from weeding them out. This is a problem of the first magnitude for any accountability system.

Once in place, new compensation schemes and performance pressures may accelerate the voluntary departures of workers who are the wrong types and induce more workers of the right types to sign up. But this will take time. And here, too, current structures get in the way. All states currently require teachers to be certified (or, if hired on an emergency basis, to become certified eventually), but there is no good evidence that certification promotes student achievement. Thus certification drastically limits the pool of potential hires, with no pay off in productivity.13 Accountability reforms typically do nothing about this; indeed, many reformers believe that stricter certification is called for. The upshot is that the replacement of less productive by more productive workers is likely to be much slower than it would otherwise be—and accountability more difficult.
These problems aside, how well can we expect an accountability system to provide the right incentives? Typically, the best way to generate high-powered incentives is by attaching consequences to performance, and the most obvious way to do this is through some form of performance pay in which teachers and administrators are compensated (at least in part) according to their success in promoting student achievement. Devising a pay-for-performance regime that has the desired results, however, is not easy. Here are a few reasons why.\(^{14}\)

First, the extent to which pay should be linked to performance depends on how well the latter can be measured. The more uncertain or inaccurate the measures, the more the authorities should rely (in part) on other forms of pay—for example, straight salary coupled with subjective evaluations. The challenge is to strike the right balance, which is difficult.

Second, with performance pay, you get what you pay for. If performance is measured by \(X\), then performance pay will induce employees to produce \(X\) even if \(X\) turns out to be little related to the organization's goal. This is what testing critics are getting at when they argue that teachers will "teach to the test" without regard for whether students really learn the material.

Third, test scores are heavily influenced by the students' social backgrounds and are not straightforward measures of teacher and administrator performance. If pay-for-performance is to work productively, employees must be held accountable only for their own impacts on student achievement, which requires a more complicated approach to measurement that factors out other influences. There are various ways to do this (through statistical controls, for instance, or value-added scores), but these methods are not straightforward either and raise new problems and controversies. Precise measurement is elusive.\(^{15}\)

Fourth, test scores tend to rise for several years after a new testing regime is put in place, but this happens because of growing familiarity with the test, not because students are learning more.\(^{16}\) Especially during the early years of an accountability system, then, test scores are likely to give a misleading impression of improved performance.

Finally, if organizational goals are multidimensional—in this case, the teaching of academics, but also of tolerance, democratic citizenship, music and art, and so on—then performance pay based on just one of these dimensions (academic achievement) will cause employees to focus all their attention on that one dimension and shift it away from the others. If the authorities value these other dimensions, too, they need to design accountability systems that, while promoting achievement, do not push the schools to ignore everything else.

These problems are daunting enough. But the reality of American education reform raises additional obstacles, because pay-for-performance is never seriously pursued or carefully designed in practice. Instead, the typical accountability system involves rewards and sanctions that are poorly conceived, and whose impacts on employee incentives are not nearly as productive as they might be.\(^{17}\)

When rewards for good performance are involved, for example, they often go to the school as a whole. As such, they constitute a collective good that, as in any context of team production, gives employees little incentive to work harder. Incentives are diluted even further if, as is often the case, rewards take the form of additional operating funds for the school instead of money that goes into people's pockets.\(^{18}\)

Sanctions (if any) for bad performance usually involve state intervention or reconstitution. But these are irrelevant to the vast majority of schools and employees and have no impact on their incentives. Furthermore, they are not well suited to solving performance problems even in the rare cases when they are invoked. States can intervene, for example, but they may know less about running the schools than local employees do, and the latter's incentives remain roughly the same: no jobs are lost, and everyone still gets paid for being unproductive. Reconstitution is more threatening, as teachers and principals in the affected schools do "lose" their jobs. But because their jobs are guaranteed within the district, the unproductive employees are simply foisted onto other schools, where they can continue to be unproductive and receive their usual salaries—which is bad for the other schools. Moreover, the "new" employees in the reconstituted schools, probably drawn from elsewhere in the district, continue to be compensated regardless of how well they perform and have incentives that are just as weak as the employees they replaced. In the end, the reconstituted schools may wind up with employees who are higher in average ability, but the rest of the schools will have their average ability levels lowered, and everyone's incentives remain basically the same. This is a strategy of rearranging the deck chairs.

Another favorite approach—sometimes misdescribed as sanctioning— involves singling out low-performing schools and providing them with additional resources and services (such as training) to turn them around. Here, again, the vast majority of schools and employees are unaffected, with no greater incentive to improve. And even in the low-performing schools, there is no positive effect on employee incentives. Indeed, as additional resources and services are desirable to them, any change in incentives could be perverse, with employees essentially being rewarded for their poor performance and having every reason to continue their unproductive ways.
This is not a pretty picture. The belief that the public schools can be held accountable for their performance, and that it can be done successfully through a system of standards, testing, and consequences, may seem to provide a reasonable agenda for improving the nation's schools. But common sense is often a poor guide to public policy, and that is the case here—even if we ignore all the political problems that, as I'll argue below, accountability is likely to run into.

Considered purely as an issue of top-down control, accountability is a very difficult proposition. The authorities face a population of agents who are not of their own choosing, whose jobs are securely protected, who have strong incentives to resist accountability, and whose actions cannot easily be observed. And all this stacks the deck against effective control, particularly given the unimpressive mechanisms the authorities have chosen to rely upon. This does not mean that accountability reforms cannot lead to somewhat better outcomes for schools and students. It simply means that the results are likely to be disappointing.

The Problem of Politics

Reformers face more than a control problem. They also face a political problem, which arises from the simple fact that public schools are agencies of democratic government. As government bodies, everything about their structure and operation, including whether and how they are held accountable, is subject to determination through the political process—and the actors that carry the most weight in that process are not necessarily interested in creating accountability systems that work. That is the problem.

The Political Power of the Agent

Politics gives a profound twist to the usual principal-agent model. The standard assumption is that the principal has certain goals that are given from the outset—student achievement and quality schools, in our case—and that his challenge is to get his agents to pursue these goals productively. Once the relationship is embedded in a political context, however, it no longer makes sense to assume that the principal's goals are exogenously set, nor even that the principal is an independent actor in the relationship. For the principals in a democratic political system are elected officials, and the whole point of politics is to determine which people get to be principals in the first place and what goals they will pursue in office.

What does this twist lead us to expect? The standard view among political scientists is that elected officials are driven primarily by reelection and that, in formulating positions on public policy, they tend to take whatever stands are necessary to gain support from the constituencies that most affect their chances at the polls. The implication is that elected officials often do not choose their policy positions according to what is in the public interest, or even according to what they personally believe. Their policy positions are variables in a political calculus and crafted to maximize their appeal to powerful groups.

There is nothing nefarious about this. Elections are the political system's method of holding public officials accountable; and even though this method—like any other—is an imperfect means of political control, the motivation to gain and keep office contributes to control by encouraging public officials to represent constituencies within the electorate (instead of, say, representing only themselves). So in this sense, the reelection motivation is actually a good thing. The real problem comes about because power in American society is unequally distributed—and this being so, reelection-minded politicians have incentives to favor whatever groups happen to be powerful, even if their interests do not reflect those of the larger society.

This problem is endemic to democracy, and it affects virtually all areas of public policy. But it is especially serious in education, because one interest group is by far the most powerful actor in this realm of politics, wielding inordinate influence over the direction and content of policy. I am speaking here of the teachers unions. The teachers unions are a problem, moreover, not simply because they skew public policy toward their own special interests. They are a problem because the special interests they represent happen to be those of the agents.

So here is the situation. Public officials, acting as principals, are responsible for providing a system of public education that meets the needs of ordinary Americans. This requires that they hire agents—teachers and administrators—and impose accountability mechanisms to ensure that the latter do their jobs productively. But the public officials are elected. So the ways they exercise their authority—the policies they support, the goals they seek—are heavily influenced by groups that can wield electoral power. And the most powerful group by far is the group that represents the agents themselves: who have interests quite different from the larger electorate and do not want to be held accountable by the authorities who are their formal bosses.

Thanks to politics, then, the familiar control relationship is not what it appears to be. The authorities are in a position to exercise organizational control over their agents within the schools. But the agents, acting mainly through the teachers unions, are in a position to exercise political control over the authorities, and thus to influence whether and exactly how that
organizational control gets exercised. As a result, a system of accountability may look like an exercise in top-down control, but it is really a system that has been shaped, perhaps profoundly so, by the self-interest of the very people it is supposed to be controlling. There is every reason to believe, therefore, that it will do a poor job of achieving genuine accountability. Indeed, to the extent that the agents can succeed in wielding their political power, it will be designed to do a poor job.21

Teachers Unions as Political Actors

Now let's get a better sense what to expect from the teachers unions. First and foremost, they are just unions, and collective bargaining is their core function. It is also the base of their power, for it is through collective bargaining that they get members, resources, and the capacity for political action. These are the fundamentals of their success and prosperity as organizations.

Their most basic interests arise from these fundamentals. Above all else, the teachers unions need to extend the reach of collective bargaining and to do whatever they can to keep members and resources and get more. Other interests follow directly from these most basic ones. For example, the teachers unions find it beneficial to protect their members' jobs, provide their members with higher pay and benefits, expand their formal rights and on-the-job autonomy, increase the demand for teachers, support higher taxes and bigger public budgets, and so on. These interests need have nothing to do with what is best for children, schools, or the public interest, and they may often lead teachers unions to take actions contrary to the greater good—by protecting the jobs of incompetent teachers, for example, or by burdening the schools with so many formal restrictions that they cannot be managed.22

There is nothing unusual about interest groups pursuing their own interests at the expense of the public good.23 What makes the teachers unions different is that they wield the kind of power that most interest groups can only dream about. Their grip on the public schools guarantees them some three million members nationwide, massive financial resources, and organizational networks at the national, state, and local levels that are ideal for coordinated political action. Thus equipped, they have everything it takes to be a major force in political campaigns. Their cash is an important source of campaign contributions. But even more important, they can put troops on the ground in virtually every electoral district and, by making phone calls, getting out the vote, and otherwise campaigning for union-friendly candidates, these troops can prove far more potent than money.24 Throughout American society, no other groups can claim this kind of coast-to-coast coverage and clout.

Indeed, a recent academic study of state-level politics ranked the teachers unions as the single most powerful interest group in the country.25

The teachers unions use their power almost exclusively on behalf of Democrats. They normally do everything they can to see that right-thinking Democrats—the most pro-union, pro-government, and antimarket—get nominated and that Democrats defeat Republicans in general elections. They are also forceful in letting Democratic officeholders know what is expected of them: the unions want favorable policies enacted, and they want threatening policies blocked. As vote-seeking politicians, the Democrats have strong incentives to go along.26 The teachers unions' great power, however, does not allow them to write their own ticket, even with Democrats. They face a few limitations worth pointing out.

Governors and presidents are less susceptible to union power than legislators are, because they have larger constituencies and are responsive to broader social interests. Executives can be influenced, but they can also be troubled.

In right-to-work states the laws do not favor collective bargaining, and the teachers unions there have less political clout. This should not be exaggerated, as they are still major players in these states. But they are less able to control public policy.27

Depending on the state and the issue, other powerful groups—from business, for example—may take up positions against the teachers unions. These groups usually have broader agendas than just education, giving them less incentive to reward or sanction politicians on educational grounds. Nonetheless, even Democrats may be cross-pressured in the presence of such opposition and less responsive to union demands.

To these limitations I have to add one more that arises from the American system of checks and balances. New legislation must run a gauntlet of subcommittees, committees, and floor votes in each of two legislative houses, as well as survive executive vetoes (and at the national level, filibusters and holds). This means that, when the teachers unions (or any interest groups) want favorable policies passed into law, they must overcome each and every veto point—while opponents must succeed only once to block. Even for the unions, then, changing public policy is difficult. The deck is stacked in favor of those who want to block, and weaker groups may often be able to stop the unions from carrying out their designs.

Yet the unions can play the blocking game too. And it is here that they are especially well positioned to get their way. In particular, they are usually powerful enough to stop the enactment of reforms that they oppose and thus to
protect a status quo—of bureaucracy, collective bargaining, minimal competition, and minimal accountability—compatible with their own best interests. During a time of educational ferment, in which there is widespread pressure for change and improvement in public education, this is the way teachers unions put their power to most effective use. They use it to block change.  

The Politics of Accountability, Part I

So it is in the politics of accountability. Reformers are dedicated to holding teachers and administrators accountable for student achievement, but this goal is threatening to union interests—and their incentive is to block. They are not powerful enough to stop the accountability movement cold. The movement has, after all, achieved legislative successes all across the country, and it has been able to do this because the authorities are eager to respond to whatever constituencies can affect their odds of reelection—and there are some who strongly favor school accountability.

A big reason for the movement's prominence is simply that accountability is very popular with the American public, and politicians—including Democrats—clearly see it as something they need to support on electoral grounds. This is particularly true of governors, who, of all public officials, are held responsible for improving the schools. They gain credit when the schools do well, they get blamed when the schools fail, and they are widely expected to "do something" to produce results. Accountability is a popular way of taking action.

Its attractiveness to authorities is all the greater because business groups have taken the lead on school accountability and pushed for reforms that are serious and far-reaching. Concerned about the low quality of the work force and motivated to create more attractive business environments in their communities and states, business groups have seen accountability—which mirrors their own emphasis on managerial efficiency—as a linchpin of school improvement.

The teachers unions, therefore, despite their predominant power, cannot count on dictating the way authorities approach the accountability issue. The authorities face competing pressures from business and the public, and they have incentives to respond to these other constituencies. So what can the unions do? One strategy is to use their power to block any move toward accountability—which, given the relative ease of blocking, would often prove successful. Yet it would not always be successful, given the power and incentives on the other side. And it would not necessarily be wise anyway, because the unions would damage their public image (and ultimately their political clout) by coming across as unyielding opponents of something so broadly popular.

A much better strategy—a favorite of interest groups in all areas of American politics—is to come out enthusiastically in "support" of the popular issue, participate in the design of "appropriate" policies, and exercise power to block the inclusion of anything that is truly threatening. In this way, the teachers unions can appear to be on the right side of the issue, while at the same time ensuring that teachers and administrators are not held accountable in any meaningful sense.

How would such a strategy play out as actual accountability systems are being designed? The answer turns on the nature of union interests and how they are affected by the three key components of modern-day accountability reform: standards, testing, and consequences.

STANDARDS. From the standpoint of union interests, there is nothing threatening about curriculum standards. Standards only become threatening if they are backed by consequences. Thus, if consequences are not involved, or if the unions are confident they can block any such proposals, then they can easily portray themselves as enthusiastic supporters of reform. What they are really supporting is standards without accountability.

Sometimes, however, the unions will be faced with policy packages that link standards to consequences. When this happens, they will take standards more seriously. They will want to see that—as "experts"—they themselves get to play integral roles in shaping the content of the standards. And they will have incentives to see that standards are relatively easy to meet: arguing for passing bars that are comfortably low, and reacting to poor test results by claiming that the standards and passing bars are themselves poorly conceived and need to be changed (by weakening them). It is heavily to their advantage in all this that the notion of standards is subjective and ambiguous to begin with. Because if the unions water down the existing standards, making it easier for students and teachers to avoid consequences, no objective baseline can prove them wrong, and they have lots of room to maneuver.

TESTS. Tests, like standards, are not threatening to the unions as long as they don't give rise to consequences. Until recently, they rarely did. Test results were essentially secret. Scores were used internally by the school system and passed along to the parents of individual students. But there was no public basis for judging how well the schools were doing, and thus little for the unions to fear.

The accountability movement changed all this. Today it is common for states to publicize test scores, and this in itself is a form of consequence—for Americans now have concrete information on school performance, and low
scores tend to generate political pressures for improvement that make life uncomfortable for school personnel. The unions do not like this. But because publicizing test scores is so popular and so easy for the authorities to do, they have had a hard time stopping it.

More troubling still from the unions' standpoint, test scores stand to be powerful mechanisms of top-down organizational control. They give the authorities objective measures of performance, and it is on this basis that rewards and sanctions are attached to behavior. A system of testing enables a system of consequences—and a system of control.

The unions, as a result, have strong incentives to oppose testing—or more practically, because testing is popular, to argue that the tests currently in use (whatever they might be) are deeply flawed, need revision, and cannot provide valid measures of anyone's performance, whether student or teacher or administrator. This argument is disingenuous, as they would make it even if the tests were perfect. Fortunately for them, however, some of the arguments they can make about the perils of testing are good ones that deserve to be taken seriously. It is right, for example, to complain when states rely solely on nationally normed tests instead of tests based on their own standards. It is right to say that reliance on a single test, rather than multiple indicators of performance, can be risky and unfair. It is right to say that many factors affect student achievement and that test scores can be misleading unless these things are adequately taken into account (which can be difficult and uncertain). And it is right to emphasize that schools do more than teach academics, and that test scores fail to measure the range of purposes that ought to guide school performance.34

Were all these things somehow resolved, however, the unions would still be against testing. When testing is done well, it allows for precise measures of performance and thus for control systems that hold school employees accountable for their performance. The unions want to prevent that from happening. What they can allow themselves to be for, as alternatives, are methods of evaluating student learning that involve subjective judgments on the part of teachers—course grades, assessments of portfolios, assessments of effort. Because student scores on these counts become the basis for evaluating teachers, a system that relies on subjective judgment essentially allows the teachers to determine their own performance evaluations. Not a bad deal if you can get it.35

CONSEQUENCES. The unions' prime goal in the politics of accountability is to weaken or eliminate any consequences that might be associated with standards and tests.36 What they want are accountability systems that look like they are designed to do the job—owing to impressive standards and tests—but lack the consequences for actually holding people accountable. If they get their way, they can have their cake and eat it, too. They can come across as supporters of accountability, but the accountability systems won't work and won't threaten their interests.

Among their highest priorities is ensuring that pay is not linked to performance, and thus that the key mechanism of top-down control is removed from consideration.37 Most of their members are likely to be averse to performance pay. But the unions also have their own objections, because performance pay creates competition among members, threatens solidarity, and puts discretion in the hands of administrators. The unions want salaries to be set (as they have been for ages) on the basis of seniority and education, which are within reach of all teachers and unrelated to performance in the classroom.38

The unions are also against attaching rewards and sanctions to whole schools based on school performance, as this too creates competition (across schools) that the unions seek to avoid. Given a choice, however, they view this approach as preferable to performance-based consequences for individual teachers, for it at least preserves the solidarity of teachers within each school and better protects them from risk.39

While the unions would prefer to see no rewards or sanctions at all, they are obviously more opposed to sanctions than rewards. Above all else, no one should ever lose a job, and there can be no weeding out process by which the school system rid itself of mediocre and incompetent teachers. Other kinds of economic sanctions—pay cuts, reductions in funding—are verboten as well. And so are commonsense policies that might lead to such sanctions: for example, the testing of existing teachers in low-performing schools to ensure that they are competent enough to stay in the classroom.

Should consequences be adopted, unions insist that they take the form of rewards: bonuses for high-performing teachers, or, far preferable, bonuses for high-performing schools (with the unions deciding how rewards are distributed among teachers within each school). A union-preferred accountability system, then, would exercise accountability—to the extent it exercises it at all—through a system of positive inducements. There would only be winners. No losers.

This same logic applies to the question of how accountability systems should grapple with the critical problem of low-performing schools. State intervention and reconstitution are both sanction-like approaches that are threatening to union interests. The preferred approach is for low-performing schools to be given greater funding, more assistance with their programs, and
more training for their teachers—which are essentially rewards and the kinds of things establishment groups are always lobbying for anyway. Having them included as "consequences" in an accountability system is just a backdoor way of directing more resources to low-performers.

The Politics of Accountability, Part II

What should we expect, then, from the politics of accountability? For starters, we should expect that many authorities will not be motivated to design accountability systems that actually work. Their goals are endogenous to the political process, shaped by the constituencies that can most affect their reelection. And the most powerful are the teachers unions, whose own interests are very much opposed to what reformers are trying to get the authorities to do.

This does not mean that the unions automatically get what they want. Reformers have public support and the power of business on their side, and this gives the authorities—governors in particular—reason to do something in creating systems of accountability. The unions' best strategy is to go along with the political tides and use their considerable clout to block or eviscerate those aspects of accountability that are most threatening to their interests.

Their success will vary, state by state, depending on how conducive the circumstances are to union power. These circumstances may be complicated. But other things being equal (and I emphasize this), the teachers unions should tend to be most successful—and accountability systems weaker—in states where Democrats control the machinery of government, where collective bargaining laws are strong, where business groups are not especially active, and where school performance is positively viewed. The unions should tend to be least successful—and accountability systems stronger—in states controlled by Republicans, where right-to-work laws make union organizing and political action difficult, where business is politically active on education, and where the performance of the public schools is widely criticized.

Across the nation, therefore, we should expect to see a great variety of accountability systems. Some may be little more than symbolic shells, others may be serious systems with real teeth, and most will lie somewhere in between—their properties depending on how much power the teachers unions are able to wield in politics. The model system, however, is sure to be heavily influenced by union interests, and thus crafted in such a way that the basic requirements of top-down control—all having to do with consequences—are either weakened or thoroughly violated. In particular, we should typically expect to see

—no serious attempt to pay people based on their performance;
—-a willingness to give out rewards, but not to apply sanctions;
—the targeting of rewards to whole schools, not to individuals; and
—no mechanisms whatever to weed out mediocre or incompetent employees.41

What we should expect to see, in short, are accountability systems that are not built to hold the schools and their employees accountable. They may look like accountability systems. And they may be called accountability systems. But they can't do their jobs very well—because they aren't designed to.

Looking Ahead

My purpose here is not to disparage the school accountability movement. I would be overjoyed if the schools could be held accountable and if student achievement and school quality could be dramatically improved as a result. But wishful thinking is not a sound basis for effective policy. To get where we want to go, we need to understand what we are up against—which requires, at the very least, a commitment to honest analysis that may tell us what we are hoping not to hear.

School accountability faces two fundamental problems, a control problem and a political problem, that undermine its prospects for success. The control problem arises because school employees have their own interests distinct from those of the authorities, as well as information that the authorities do not have, giving them the incentive and the capacity to resist top-down efforts to hold them accountable. The political problem arises because the authorities are elected officials, are responsive to the political power of school employees—exercised mainly through the teachers unions—and thus have incentives not to pursue true accountability anyway.

Both problems are inevitable, and they are not simply going to go away. In the foreseeable future, school employees will continue to have their own interests and information unavailable to the authorities. And elected officials will continue to govern the schools and respond to the power of the teachers unions. The only realistic conclusion is that, for some time to come, we should have low expectations for what accountability systems can achieve.

This does not mean that they should be discarded. We have an education system that for almost a century has not been held accountable for student achievement, whose incentives are almost precisely the opposite of what high levels of productivity require, and whose job characteristics attract employees of the wrong types. An accountability system that emphasizes student achievement, and that even attempts to motivate school personnel along
those lines, involves little risk of reducing achievement and offers at least some prospect of improving it, simply because the structure of the current system is so utterly inappropriate.

Some of the obstacles to accountability, moreover, may be somewhat reduced over time. One way to ameliorate control problems, for example, is through better measures of performance, measures that address the reasonable objections of critics and provide more efficacious means of holding people accountable. This is a job for education researchers, and we can expect progress in the future. Researchers can also help figure out how to use these measures, perhaps in combination with subjective evaluations by superiors, to design incentive structures that properly motivate people.42

Reform may also benefit from a built-in bonus, which comes about because many accountability systems are likely to be self-improving over time. The reason is that any semiserious form of accountability will make life difficult for unproductive employees, putting them under pressure to work harder and produce results, and they will have at least some incentive to quit their jobs. Similarly, people who are the right types—more able, more geared to productive performance—will find these jobs more attractive than before. The sheer persistence of accountability systems over a long enough period of time, therefore, may change the internal composition of personnel in a good way and lead to better outcomes than a short-term view of the system would suggest.

If we look purely at control issues, then, there are reasons for guarded optimism. Unfortunately, the political problem remains, and it threatens to stop any progress in its tracks. We have to remember that the authorities are not eager to follow the lessons of new research, however much they may have learned about the best way to promote accountability, because that is not their goal in the first place. Their goals and decisions are shaped by politics; and to mollify powerful groups, they are happy to adopt accountability mechanisms that they know will not work very well. Research is not going to change that. Politics also affects the extent to which accountability systems can be self-improving through changes in composition: the authorities have strong incentives, as long as the teachers unions are powerful, not to adopt the kind of compensation systems that are attractive to the right types of employees and unattractive to the wrong types. Changes in composition may still occur, but they will be less consequential and take longer than if the authorities actually wanted to make the changes happen.

As all this suggests, politics is the stickier of the two wickets. Absent politics, the control problem might be ameliorated over time. But politics is not absent. And because this is unavoidably so, the authorities—pressured by the unions—can be counted upon to exercise much less control than they have the capacity for, and to take less than full advantage of developments that promise to make their accountability job easier.

When all is said and done, then, the top-down approach to accountability—taken alone—is destined to be a disappointment. The good news, however, is that this is not the only approach to accountability available to us, and it need not be adopted all by itself. While the accountability movement has thus far been transfixed by the top-down model, schools can also be held accountable from below through well-designed systems of school choice. And there is good reason to think that the combination of the two approaches might be much more effective.43

When parents are able to choose their kids' schools, whether their choices are purely public (via charter schools) or include private schools as well (via vouchers), the regular public schools are put on notice that inadequate performance has costly consequences: they can lose kids and money. This gives them incentives to perform. And the stronger the competitive threat, the stronger the incentives.

Some of the incentives are felt collectively at the school level and thus are not as potent for individual employees as they might be. But pressures are also transmitted up the chain of authority, for no one responsible for the regular public schools wants the system to shrink and wither as parents run for the exits. These officials have incentives to stop the hemorrhage, and a key way to do this is to make performance much more central to the way schools are organized and employees compensated, hired, and fired. The bottom-up and top-down forces for accountability are thus joined. The competitive pressure from the bottom gives the authorities much stronger incentives to be serious about top-down accountability, and to create better-performing organizations that can keep kids and money from leaving.

Of course, there is a political problem with school choice as well. The unions are fully aware that choice threatens their interests, and they put political pressure on the authorities to oppose it. But choice is popular with parents, a powerful movement is behind it, and the unions are not totally successful in blocking it. Parents have many more choices today than they did ten years ago, and both choice and competition are expanding (especially through the increasing numbers of charter schools). As with today's accountability systems, these choice systems are a pale reflection of what reformers would like to see. But even imperfect choice systems are sources of educational change.44

They are also sources of political change—and this, more than anything else, may hold the key to successful reform. For choice undermines the politi-
cal power of the teachers unions. Were children allowed to leave inadequate public schools for charter or private schools, the vast majority of which are nonunion, life would become more difficult for the teachers unions. They would lose members and resources, their organizing task would become far more challenging, and their basis for political clout would begin to erode. Furthermore, they would have incentives to use their remaining power in a different way. With competition a reality, they would see that the costs and formal rigidities they usually impose on schools would put them at a disadvantage relative to their competitors, giving them incentives to moderate their demands. Indeed, they would see that to keep kids and money—and thus members and resources—they would need to think seriously about accepting accountability mechanisms (such as performance pay) that they usually oppose. This, in turn, would reduce the political constraints on the authorities and give them greater incentives to opt for accountability systems that might actually work.

If the movement for school accountability is to succeed, therefore, reformers need to break out of the mind-set that equates accountability with top-down methods of control, and recognize that—for political as well as organizational reasons—a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches is likely to prove far more potent. Without such a reorientation, the movement cannot hope to make much progress. But with it, the future of reform may be very bright indeed.

Notes


5. For an overview of how employees are generally modeled and understood, see Edward P. Lazear, Personnel Economics for Managers (Wiley and Sons, 1998).


8. On the problem of adverse selection and how jobs with different characteristics tend to attract (and repel) workers of different types, see Lazear, Personnel Economics for Managers.


17. For a description of accountability reforms adopted in the states, see “Quality Counts.”

18. For a discussion of problems inherent in team production, see Lazear, Personnel Economics for Managers.


21. For a more general argument that government agencies are often designed to be ineffective, see Terry M. Moe, “The Politics of Bureaucratic Structure,” in John E.

22. Moe, "Teachers Unions and the Public Schools."


24. Moe, "Teachers Unions and the Public Schools."


27. Moe, "Teachers Unions and the Public Schools"; and Lieberman, *The Teacher Unions."

28. Moe, "Teachers Unions and the Public Schools."


30. Both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) publicly support standards. The AFT, in particular, has moved aggressively to be a leading voice on this score. But the fact is that both groups are opposed to any meaningful consequences. See National Education Association, "NEA 2001–2002 Resolutions" (www.nea.org [March 18, 2002]); and American Federation of Teachers, *Making Standards Matter* (New York, 2001) (www.aft.org [March 18, 2002]).

31. The NEA, for example, says that "state and local affiliates must participate in the planning, development, implementation, and refinement of standards, conditions, and assessments." It also says that "classroom teachers must be involved in the development of classroom assessment systems and are best qualified to determine the criteria for assessment of students and dissemination of results." See National Education Association, "NEA 2001–2002 Resolutions."

32. No one wants to say they are for weak standards. But the unions are consistently critical of tests that point to low levels of achievement (and thus, implicitly, low levels of performance by their members), and they often take political action to modify the results (allowing more people to pass) by weakening the standards on which they are based. See Hill and Lake, "Standards and Accountability in Washington State"; Hess, "Reform, Resistance, . . . Retreat?"; and Kurtz, "Testing, Testing."


35. Both the NEA and the AFT argue for broader, more comprehensive evaluations of students that go well beyond the usual standardized tests, and these sorts of evaluations inevitably involve subjective judgments by teachers. See National Education Association, "NEA 2001–2002 Resolutions"; and American Federation of Teachers, *Making Standards Matter."

36. The NEA, for example, says that it "opposes the use of standardized tests when—Used as the criterion for the reduction or withholding of any educational funding . . . Results are used to compare students, teachers, programs, schools, communities, and states. . . . The results lead to sanctions or other punitive actions. . . . Student scores are used to evaluate teachers or to determine compensation or employment status." See National Education Association, "NEA 2001–2002 Resolutions."

37. The AFT is flatly opposed to merit pay (which is essentially pay for performance), but it has tried to talk a more liberal line on teacher pay lately. What its liberalized position boils down to, though, is that it is willing to get away from the traditional salary schedule somewhat (but not entirely) and have teachers paid in part based on things such as advanced certification, teaching in low-performing schools, and mentoring. These roles and qualifications are potentially open to any teacher and do not depend on the teacher's performance in the classroom or how much the students learn. See American Federation of Teachers, "AFT on the Issues: Merit Pay," (www.aft.org [March 18, 2002]). The AFT affiliate in Cincinnati negotiated a contract in late 2000 that included pay for performance, and pundits around the country pointed to this rare event as evidence that the unions are becoming more flexible. In the spring of 2001, however, the president of the Cincinnati union was voted out of office by a landslide. Subsequently, union members voted—96.3 percent to 3.7 percent—to overturn the performance plan. So much for liberalization. See Education Intelligence Agency, "Cincinnati Federation of Teachers Aborts Pay for Performance Plan," *Communique* (May 20, 2002) (www.ciaonline.com).

38. Moe, "Teachers Unions and the Public Schools"; and Lieberman, *The Teacher Unions."

39. Here and in the arguments below, evidence that these are the positions the unions tend to take in politics can be found in Hill and Lake, "Standards and Accountability in Washington State"; Hess, "Reform, Resistance, . . . Retreat?"; and Kurtz, "Testing, Testing."

40. It is not an accident that the accountability systems in Texas and North Carolina—both right-to-work states where unions are weaker than elsewhere—are often taken as examples of strong systems that work reasonably well. Pointing to examples like this is a bit risky, however, as a means of documenting my claims about where we ought to find strong and weak accountability systems, because the "other things
being equal" caveat needs to be taken seriously and because even the four factors I mention can interact in a variety of ways. California, for example, has a very powerful union and a Democratic governor, but this governor supported the creation of a fairly strong accountability system (compared with other states). I suspect this is because the state has performed horribly in recent national test rankings, and there is intense public pressure for governmental action. The union did not like it and is still trying to overturn it, but the Democratic governor is hanging tough. In California, then, one factor—horrible performance—seems to have outweighed all the others. Whether this is usually the case, I cannot say. But it would be a mistake to think that accountability can make progress only in Republican states with weak unions.

41. And empirically, in fact, this is what we do see. For an overview of accountability systems, refer to "Quality Counts."

42. For a good discussion of what researchers can contribute to the design of effective accountability systems, see Eric Hanushek and Margaret E. Raymond, "Sorting Out Accountability Systems," in Williamson M. Evers and Herbert J. Walberg, eds., School Accountability (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), pp. 75–104.


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Rethinking Accountability
Politics

JENNIFER HOCHSCHILD

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed an array of new policies to promote school improvement and accountability—charter schools, alternative certification programs, systemic reform involving standards and high-stakes tests, a Republican-sponsored law promising to "leave no child behind," state or city takeover of failing school systems, and others. As James B. Hunt Jr., former governor of North Carolina, insisted, "In this new era of accountability, candidates will be judged for their education leadership. They must be knowledgeable about the issues and relentless about results. I predict that the avowed education candidates who fail to follow up platitudes with performance, and who fail to match rhetoric with results, won't be around much longer."

However, this move to electoral accountability for schooling outcomes needs to be explained. Political logic suggests that these reforms should not have occurred. Powerful teachers unions resisted many of them and were ambivalent about others. Parents and citizens were reasonably content with the schools in their community; they saw more problems with students' behavior than with their test scores. Outcomes of schooling in most locations had not deteriorated drastically, so except in inner cities there was no crisis demanding a solution. Elected officials had a long history of remaining far removed from the complicated morass of public schooling. More generally, they are almost always allergic to strict measures of accountability. The