HOT TOPICS
The cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act is a performance-based accountability system consisting of three elements: goals, assessments for measuring progress, and consequences. The goals are embodied in content/performance standards that educators use to guide curriculum and instruction. Tests measure student learning and determine whether students have mastered the standards. Improved performance on the tests leads to rewards intended to reinforce effective behavior; poor performance on the tests leads to sanctions and improvement efforts intended to modify ineffective behavior. Some of the consequences operate through parents. If a child’s school is deemed to be in need of improvement, parents can request a transfer to another school and/or supplemental educational services from private providers.

Decisionmakers are looking for guidance to help them make their systems as effective as possible. One place to look for insights into effective accountability mechanisms is outside the education sector. A newly released RAND report examines accountability in the manufacturing and service sectors to find practices that might be relevant for educators.

Full study: Organizational Improvement and Accountability

Accountability in Other Sectors
RAND researchers examined five accountability models:

- Two examples drawn from the manufacturing sector: the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Program and the Toyota Production System. These are models of organizational improvement set within the larger context of market accountability rather than full-fledged accountability systems.

- A performance incentive model undergirding the job training programs for the poor established by the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982.

- Professional accountability in the legal sector.


Implications for Education
While recognizing that the education sector has unique characteristics, the researchers’ analyses of these different models offer useful insights on how to enhance system-wide accountability, including how to improve the operation of schools and districts to achieve higher performance. Some lessons for education include:

- Broaden performance measures. Performance objectives will drive behavior—for better or for worse. Expanding “what counts” in the accountability system will diffuse pressures to focus too narrowly or to deemphasize other priorities.

- Make performance goals fair to all students and schools. The accountability system should establish reasonable improvement targets for all schools and should not reward or penalize schools or districts for factors beyond their control. The goal of fair comparisons also needs to be balanced against the goal of closing the gap between successful and unsuccessful students.

- Develop standards of practice in promising areas, build a knowledge base about effective practices, and encourage its use as a basis for professional accountability. Creating more explicit standards of practice would provide a basis for professional accountability and provide guidance to help schools and districts improve. Efforts should be made to develop more-detailed instructional guidelines for teaching in specific subjects and to develop a knowledge base about effective practices based on rigorous research. Such guidelines would broaden and deepen professional accountability in education.

- Develop an integrated, comprehensive improvement strategy to help schools and districts improve. Key elements of an improvement strategy:
  - A focused institutional self-assessment (including asking the right questions and assembling the right kinds of information)
  - An understanding of the school system as a linked process
  - Development and dissemination of a knowledge base about effective teaching practices
  - Empowerment of participants (notably teachers) in the process so they feel more committed to improvement efforts

Such information could help schools and districts develop their own improvement process. However, developing and adopting such a strategy in education will require time, effort, and a willingness to adapt principles from outside the education sector.

Read more: Conclusions from Organizational Improvement and Accountability report

PROJECTS UNDERWAY
Implementing K–12 Reform in Qatar

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