

## Accountability and Teacher Motivation

When I commanded a training company in the U.S. Army, my brigade commander told me his secret for motivating new recruits. “Remember,” he confided, “when you’ve got them by the b—s, their hearts and minds will follow.”

That’s the idea behind “test ’em and report the result” teacher accountability. Suspecting too many teachers are goofing off, politicians order standardized “tests” to “measure” student “learning.” Then teachers’ feet are held to the fire by making the results public. This, it is assumed, will motivate slothful pedagogues to work harder.

Is that true? Will being held publicly accountable for standardized test results motivate teachers to achieve more? Let’s think about it.

### The Tests Themselves

First, we should ask if the kids give a damn when they take the tests. If they don’t, they won’t make an effort and the tests will measure only their indifference. Having seen this happen, educators dream up strategies to motivate those about to take such tests. They beg, they threaten, they cajole; but do these strategies work? That’s anybody’s guess.

Then there is the question of whether the tests measure anything worth knowing. Theoretically such tests measure knowledge and skill acquisition, but is it knowledge and skills we should care about? After all, the point of schooling is not just to make students more knowledge-

able and skillful but to make them wiser. (Remember, Adolf Eichmann knew a lot and was quite skillful.) As Samuel Johnson puts it, “The supreme end of education is expert discernment in all things—the power to tell the good from the bad, the genuine from the counterfeit, and to prefer the good and the genuine rather than the bad and the counterfeit.” Does anyone sincerely believe that the standardized tests concocted by the Educational Testing Service and its brethren measure anything like this? They don’t even come close.

Summing up, we don’t know how many students take achievement tests seriously. But we do know that they measure relatively unimportant things. Is this what we want to use to hold teachers accountable?

### Teacher Motivation

Here is another consideration. The “test ’em and report the result” approach to teacher accountability pays no attention to what is known about achievement motivation. What does research say? Will increased accountability really motivate teachers?

Psychologists have long known that people facing new challenges respond in very different ways. For example, “mastery oriented” people tend to welcome tough new tasks. Initial difficulties are regarded in a neutral or even positive way. These individuals expect problems, and they assume that sufficient effort and knowledge usually win out. Provided they have the necessary resources and freedom of action, mastery types usually respond to increased accountability by maintaining or improving their performance.

“Helpless oriented” types react very differently. They blame their own “lack of ability” for

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any initial difficulties and have low expectations of success. Challenges foster negative emotions, such as frustration and anxiety. These, in turn, lower performance, starting a downward, self-defeating spiral. Eventually “helpless” types often give up altogether.

Ultimately, achievement motivation is a function of people’s beliefs and opinions about themselves. People with low self-esteem typically have a correspondingly low opinion of their own abilities. And when faced with difficult challenges, such individuals experience such negative feelings that improved performance is blocked.

How does this relate to teacher accountability? Provided demands are fair, teachers with high self-esteem will tend to see increased accountability as a challenge. Teachers with low self-esteem, however, will often experience debilitating performance anxiety.

Have the “test ‘em and report the result” types considered achievement motivation research? Why should they? They haven’t thought carefully about the other dimensions of their “reforms.” Besides, this whole thing is more about politics than it is about motivating teachers. Particularly, it’s about Republicans paying teacher unions back for supporting Democratic candidates.

## Parents and Peers

Is the “test ‘em and report the result” approach to teacher accountability fair? No, not really. Research clearly indicates, for instance, that non-school factors decisively influence school success. So if those test scores really measure school achievement, they also measure non-school influences.

Consider the critical role parents play in school achievement. Despite all the blather about every child’s ability to learn, negligent parenting usually undermines even the most artful teaching. Children savaged by abusive parents can be beyond even the best teacher’s reach. Parents too busy fighting to notice what they are doing to their kids easily counteract the most superb lessons. Parental drug or alcohol addiction can turn school itself into a mere triviality.

This is why it is patently unfair to hold teachers accountable if unfit parents cause poor school performance. Does the “test ‘em and report the result” approach take that into account? No, parenting is typically not considered at all. If test results are poor, blame the teachers.

Peer group influence also often overpowers good teaching—particularly during adolescence. When inner city peers contemptuously deride learning as “acting white,” teachers command few adequate antidotes. Enthusiasm diminishes when a kid works hard in school and his peers deride him or even beat the hell out of him for his trouble. Schoolwork loses out when juvenile gangs offer more “love” than parents do. Do “test ‘em and report the result” partisans take peer influence into account? No, not even on their good days.

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The effects of poverty must also be considered. When a child grows up in poverty, can a teacher be fairly expected to overcome its effects in 180 days a year? When a child’s brain is damaged by lead poisoning, is the resultant poor schoolwork the teacher’s fault? Do the “test ‘em” reformers take poverty into account? No, they say that teachers are failing these children. That’s incorrect. It is America that is failing both these children and their teachers.

## Research on Non-School Factors

Two classic studies clearly show how profoundly non-school factors influence school outcome. In the 1960s a team of researchers led by James Coleman, a Harvard professor of education, collected data on 600,000 children in all fifty states. They were surprised and disappointed to find that variations in school achievement were largely due to non-school factors, particularly family background. In *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Coleman puts it this way:

One implication stands out above all: that schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.

In the 1970s Christopher Jencks conducted a similarly extensive three-year study of American social differences as they relate to school achievement. Like Coleman, Jencks found that school results are very strongly influenced by the characteristics of the entering children. In *Inequality* Jencks sums it up this way:

[C]hildren seem to be far more influenced by what happens at home than what happens in school. They may also be more influenced by what happens on the streets and by what they see on television. Everything else—the school budget, its policies, the characteristics of the teachers—is either secondary or completely irrelevant.

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It doesn't take much thought to figure out how this research is pertinent to "test 'em and report the result" teacher accountability. Teachers are being held accountable for things they don't control. Is there a better way to destroy teacher morale?

## **Fair Accountability and Professional Sovereignty**

What can teachers fairly be held accountable for? Knowing their subject(s) is a fair expectation. And—if they have sovereignty over their classrooms—so are maintaining high standards, having well-prepared lessons, and establishing a carefully considered system of rewards and punishments. To *fairly* be held accountable for more than that, teachers must have schools that are safe, clean, physically adequate, and well-maintained. What is more, teachers, not school boards or administrators, must be in charge of curriculum and disciplinary policy. In short, responsibility must not exceed authority. Teacher power is an absolute precondition for teacher accountability.

## **Summing Up**

Here are two general principles for instituting fair teacher accountability:

*Teacher accountability cannot fairly be increased unless non-school factors are part of the equation.*

*Teacher autonomy and resources must increase commensurately with accountability.*

When either of these things fails to happen, teacher accountability is just scapegoating in disguise.