

## Redesigning Accountability Systems for Education

by Susan H. Fuhrman

Accountability is a topic on everyone's mind. In just about every state, schools are being held accountable for student performance under systems put into effect over the past 5-10 years. As states are providing remedies and enacting sanctions for low performance, policymakers are realizing the daunting implications of the task in front of them. In over half the states, students will have to pass a state test to graduate from high school; concerns about large numbers of failures, particularly for minority students, are mounting. The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, sets new requirements for state accountability systems as a condition of federal aid for disadvantaged children. As a result, states are actively reexamining their accountability policies.

To assist in the redesign of accountability systems, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and the Center for Research on Evaluation, Student Standards, and Testing (CRESST) sought to assemble knowledge from new research on emerging accountability systems. A book, *Redesigning Accountability Systems for Education*, edited by Susan H. Fuhrman and Richard F. Elmore (Teachers College Press, in press), contains chapters by leading accountability researchers. This issue of CPRE Policy Briefs summarizes the book by focusing on four questions the authors of the book address:

- 1) How valid are new accountability systems?
- 2) How fair are new accountability systems?

- 3) What are the effects of new accountability systems?
- 4) What is necessary to improve the functioning of accountability systems?

This Policy Brief reviews the many issues that states are confronting as they implement accountability systems, and provides guidance for states looking to fine-tune or redesign accountability systems to help meet policies as they were intended. Specifically, this Brief offers recommendations for improving accountability systems by enhancing the use of expert technical advice, by improving the collection and interpretation of system data, and by investing in capacity building to ensure that both students and educators have the necessary means to effectively respond to accountability systems.

### Background

The accountability systems written about in the book are those established over the past 5-10 years, mostly at the state level, although a number of districts have similar systems. NCLB accountability provisions also reflect the same principles.

These systems are distinguished by their attention to school-level performance and by their inclusion of consequences for that performance. They are quite different from earlier approaches to accountability that primarily focused on district compliance with state regulations. The new systems grow out of a climate that draws strong parallels between education and business; they intend to focus schools on the bottom line. They also reflect an attempt, strong in rhetoric if not reality, by states to back off from detailed regulations

### Book Release

#### Redesigning Accountability Systems for Education

Edited by Susan H. Fuhrman and Richard F. Elmore (In Press)

Available from Teachers College Press; Telephone: (800) 575-6566; Online orders: [www.teacherscollegepress.com](http://www.teacherscollegepress.com)

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## **CPRE/CRESST Standards for Accountability Systems**

### **Standards on System Components**

- Accountability systems should employ different types of data from multiple sources.
- The weighting of elements in the system, different test content, and different information sources should be made explicit.
- Accountability systems should include data elements that allow for interpretations of student, institution, and administrative performance.
- Accountability expectations should be made public and understandable for all participants in the system.
- Accountability systems should include the performance of all students, including subgroups that historically have been difficult to assess.

### **Testing Standards**

- Decisions about individual students should not be made on the basis of a single test.
- Multiple test forms should be used when there are repeated administrations of an assessment.
- The validity of measures that have been administered as part of an accountability system should be documented for the various purposes of the system.
- If tests are to help improve system performance, data should be provided illustrating that the results are modifiable by quality instruction and student effort.
- If test data are used as a basis of rewards or sanctions, evidence of technical quality of the measures and error rates associated with misclassification of individuals or institutions should be published.
- Evidence of test validity for students with different language backgrounds should be made available publicly.
- Evidence of test validity for children with disabilities should be made available publicly.
- If tests are claimed to measure content and performance standards, evidence of the relationship to particular standards or sets of standards should be provided.

### **Stakes**

- Stakes for accountability systems should apply to adults and students.
- Incentives and sanctions should be coordinated for adults and students to support system goals.
- Appeal procedures should be available to contest rewards and sanctions.
- Stakes for results and their phase-in schedule should be made explicit at the outset of the implementation of the system.
- Accountability systems should begin with broad, diffuse stakes and move to specific consequences for individuals and institutions as the system aligns.

### **Public Reporting Formats**

- System results should be made broadly available to the media, with sufficient time for reasonable analysis and with clear explanations of legitimate and potential illegitimate interpretations of results.
- Reports to districts and schools should promote appropriate interpretation and use of results by including multiple indicators of performance, error estimates, and performance by subgroup.

### **Evaluation**

- Longitudinal studies should be planned, implemented, and reported, evaluating effects of the accountability program. Minimally, questions should determine the degree to which the system: builds capacity of staff; affects resource allocation; supports high-quality instruction; promotes student equity access to education; minimizes corruption; affects teacher quality, recruitment, and retention; and produces unanticipated outcomes.
- The validity of test-based inferences should be subject to ongoing evaluation. In particular, evaluation should address: aggregate gains in performance over time and impact on identifiable student and personnel groups.