

NEPC REVIEW: SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY— PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE (HOOVER INSTITUTION, NOVEMBER 2020)



Reviewed by:

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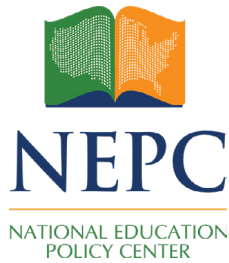
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Summary

A recent report from the Hoover Institution argues that state and federal officials should retain results-oriented accountability systems that use standardized assessments of students followed by consequences for not meeting performance goals. The report contends that these systems can be improved by expanding assessment to more grades, transparently reporting those results, and focusing on intervening in low-performing schools through a combination of intervention-style and market-driven consequences coupled with an inspectorate system to evaluate schools. However, as explained in this review, the report is problematic for a number of reasons. It ignores a plethora of literature on the deleterious impact of test-based accountability on outcomes that could provide a more nuanced understanding of these systems. It fails to explain why these systems should be extended to include more testing at more grades. It also provides no evidence on the efficacy of its preferred reform strategies for low-performing schools, which include combining external interventions with market-driven consequences. Rather than evidence, the report relies on unsupported theories of accountability and market-driven reform to provide a rationale for its conclusions and recommendations. For these reasons, policymakers, educators, and state education administrators should not rely on this report for guidance as they consider strategies for assisting low-performing schools and districts.



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I. Introduction

In November 2020, the Hoover Institution’s “Hoover Education Success Initiative” released a report, *School Accountability—Past, Present, and Future: Findings and Recommendations for State and District Policymakers* written by Chester E. Finn, Jr., focused on school accountability.¹ Divided into four parts, it traces the evolution of accountability policy since the mid-1960s up to the passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. By taking stock of ESSA and accountability, the report’s stated aim is “to examine how that’s working, how it can be made to work better, and what may lie ahead.”²

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The overall conclusion of the report is that states and districts should not abandon test-based accountability systems, and that these systems can be improved by expanding assessment, transparently reporting assessment results, and focusing on intervening in low-performing schools through a combination of intervention-style and market-driven consequences coupled with an inspectorate system to evaluate schools. To reach this conclusion, the report traces the evolution of accountability policy beginning in the mid-1960s, when, the report argues, assumptions about what it meant to be educated began to change from a focus on school resources, course offerings, and operations to a focus on outcomes. This was facilitated, according to the report, by the emergence of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the 1966 report by James S. Coleman suggesting that school resources were weakly related to student achievement.³ A major shift came in 1983 following the release of *A Nation at Risk* report that was critical of American K-12 education, and subse-

quent reform efforts including the emergence of standards-based or systemic school reform.

The report moves on to the evolution of federal policy from the America 2000 initiative to Goals 2000, and the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) in 1994 that required states to develop academic standards and assessments. The report argues that because IASA paid insufficient attention to consequences for poor performance, it did not improve achievement, thereby setting the stage for the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2000 that emphasized mandated consequences. A waiver era followed in which states sought waivers from the NCLB's requirements, a process that continued into the Obama administration and the Race to the Top program, which, according to the report, contributed to an anti-testing movement on the part of teachers and parents.

The second section explicates a theory of accountability and reviews the evidence on the impact of accountability regimes, specifically the impact of NCLB on student achievement on standardized tests. The report identifies three legs of an accountability system: specifying desired outcomes; the creation and use of measures, most often standardized tests, to gauge how well those outcomes are or are not being achieved; and consequences. On who is accountable, the report builds its argument around school-level accountability. The focus on school accountability, it asserts, has generated pushback from the education community, stating that "those who lead and work in a school seldom like or want it."⁴

According to the report, the effectiveness of accountability indicators is dependent on the consequences attached to them. The report suggests that consequences can take various forms, from the diffusion of information that may trigger changes or interventions mandated by either the state or federal government. It acknowledges that many of these interventions (e.g., outside experts, changing school leaders, replacing staff, converting a school to a charter, or closing the school) have a mixed record, but concludes that these efforts "have produced measurable gains for students only in places that engage in serious, dramatic reform efforts . . ." and fail when "there has been much wheel spinning."⁵ It then takes up the testing backlash, which it attributes to "overwrought accountability systems, inflamed by educators who don't like what the emphasis on tests is doing to their curricula and pedagogy and would just as soon the assessments and accountability structures disappear."⁶

While the report raises several questions about the impact of accountability regimes, the primary focus is on the impact of NCLB-era accountability on student test scores. The report argues that there is persuasive evidence that state-developed accountability systems that emerged in the 1990s boosted achievement, but did not narrow the Black-White achievement gap. While the report acknowledges that there is no consensus on whether "federally driven school accountability regimes of recent decades" were effective at improving student performance, it asserts that during the early years of NCLB, there is evidence of modest achievement gains, primarily in math and in the early grades, and for some student groups.

The third section describes changes made to ESEA as a response to critiques and the unworkability of NCLB, resulting in the passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. The report argues that ESSA scaled back, but did not abandon, the NCLB school accountability prescriptions and, by giving states more flexibility to design their own accountability systems, resulted in considerable variability across states in how states interpreted and

applied the law. Concerned that ESSA flexibility coupled with political backlash to testing would undermine state commitment to accountability and testing, the report maintains that strong accountability plans are essential and recommends eight elements that it asserts are “the requisites for a thorough and responsible accountability plan that fulfills ESSA’s requirements while operating within its limits.”⁷

In the fourth section, the report revisits the pushback against testing and accountability, which, it argues, is increasing and putting the future of high-stakes testing and test-based accountability in jeopardy. It recommends a third iteration of accountability:

. . . a well-designed system of external exit examinations should be curriculum-based, define achievement relative to an external standard, measure across the full range of student performance, signal multiple levels of accomplishment, and cover the vast majority of students in a given school system.⁸

Information and consequences are central to the report’s accountability model. For information, it recommends unified data systems that track student progress beyond high school, into college and careers. It also recommends assessing young children for kindergarten readiness, regular assessment beginning in Grade 2, and end-of-course exams in high schools. The report considers two approaches to applying consequences: intervention in low-performing schools by “authoritative outsiders” who can dictate changes in weak schools or “informed choice” exercised by parents. The report argues that the former relies on congenial regulatory and political conditions; the latter on market forces that provide families the ability to exit weak schools for better ones. To account for the shortcomings of each approach, the report suggests that blending the two approaches may be necessary. Both, according to the report, rely on clear and transparent information about school and student performance.

The report concludes that “results-based accountability” and high-quality assessments of student learning are essential to K-12 education and to forgo them “would return us to a pre-Coleman era of school inputs, promises, and processes” that would put America “at risk” due to weak achievement and inadequate school performance.⁹

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The findings and conclusions of the report are based on a review of the literature and theoretical justifications. The literature review relies on existing literature on school accountability. The theoretical orientation articulates theories of action on how outcome-based accountability systems and market-driven reforms should work.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report relies on a problematic approach to reviews of existing literature as evidence for its conclusions.

Paucity of Research Articles

The literature review relies heavily on three research reviews previously released by the Hoover Education Success Initiative.¹⁰ While the report acknowledges these as the primary source for its findings and recommendations, the report represents a compilation of these three reports rather than an independent analysis of existing research. In addition, the majority of the works cited are not research articles, but rather draw from trade journals, media publications, and think tanks.¹¹ Given the plethora of research on school accountability, one would expect a broader and more rigorous range of research citations.

Lack of Comprehensive Research Review

The report does not cover the full scope of research on the reports' topics and overstates the impact of NCLB accountability on student achievement. It concludes that "we see solid evidence of modest achievement gains," that pre-NCLB and NCLB-based accountability systems "generated meaningful, though not transformational, improvements in school improvement," and that "standards-based accountability policies have contributed to measurable improvements in student performance."¹² Evidence, however, find that the positive effects of high-stakes testing are limited and that gains on high-stakes tests failed to generate similar gains on low-stakes tests such as NAEP.¹³ For example, researchers found that NCLB did not have any sustainable and generalizable policy effects, but that improvements in average achievement and narrowing of achievement gaps were associated with long-term statewide instructional capacity and teacher resources.¹⁴ The report also ignores research on the achievement gap. Research shows that the narrowing of racial and social economic achievement gaps stopped in the 1990s, and widened under NCLB and mandated testing.¹⁵ At the same time, the gap between high- and low-income students has widened on a variety of independent tests.¹⁶ Recent scores on international exams have also remained flat since 2000.¹⁷

The review of outcomes is limited to the NCLB era and does not include research on the impact of waiver-era or ESSA accountability systems on outcomes. It leaves out research on other factors that impact student performance, including the importance of access to high-quality teachers, especially for disadvantaged students, and the role of a rigorous and coherent curriculum.¹⁸ Most disturbing, the report implicates educators as responsible for the anti-testing movement but fails to investigate how test-based accountability has affected practitioners' day-to-day behavior or the complexity of factors giving rise to the anti-testing movement.¹⁹

The report insists that school-level performance is an appropriate measure of accountability, ignoring the limitations of focusing on school-level measures. One such limitation is that test scores do not reflect all aspects of school performance and ignore the fact that schools

are not the only influence on test scores.²⁰ Another is that because excessive test preparation inflates students' scores, test scores are a poor measure for identifying which schools are struggling.²¹ While test scores describe some of what students can do, they cannot explain all that they can do or why they can or cannot do it.²² It is useful to know why a school is low performing before imposing a remedy, something the report ignores.

The report argues that consequences are a necessary component if accountability systems are to work. However, it provides no evidence on the efficacy of its preferred reform strategies for low-performing schools, which include combining external interventions with market-driven consequences. It attributes any failures of consequences to work to state and district practices of adopting the “flabbiest and least intrusive—hence least effective—options” or to “unsophisticated school shoppers.”²³ Instead of evidence, the report relies on theories of how external interventions and school choice policies ought to work, while ignoring evidence on how they actually work. Moreover, the report lacks a clear definition of “intervention” and it is not obvious which type of intervention is preferred. This lack of specificity is confusing since the report is critical of ESSA for “its lack of specificity with respect to consequences.”²⁴

The report acknowledges that the evidence on externally mandated school improvements, turnarounds, and takeovers are not encouraging, citing one reference from a trade journal. External interventions pre-date NCLB and there is ample evidence on the limitations of these reforms. For example, evidence on replacing school staff or school reconstitution as a school turnaround strategy suggests that this is a risky strategy that may actually harm rather than help schools.²⁵ Under federal ESSA policy, research on turnaround strategies is decidedly mixed and highly dependent on organizational capacity, financial support, and other mediating factors.²⁶ Research on closing schools as a reform strategy finds that school closures have at best weak and decidedly mixed benefits, while at worst they have detrimental repercussions for students if districts do not ensure that seats at higher-performing schools are available for transfer students.²⁷ The report does not acknowledge that school closures are complex undertakings involving major logistic, relationship and school culture challenges.²⁸

The report defines informed parental choice as allowing families to remove their children from weak schools and send them to stronger ones. It argues that “along the way, these dynamics may also induce changes in weak schools—driven by the need to retain market share—and encourage strong schools to grow or replicate to accommodate more students.”²⁹ It cites no evidence to substantiate this claim. Indeed, there is scant evidence that school choice is effective at turning around low-performing schools.³⁰ Nor do we know much about the qualities that might make charters succeed as a turnaround strategy.³¹ The report further argues that “the opportunity to create new schools—private, charter, district, etc.—has yielded some remarkably fine offerings.”³² For evidence, it cites one study on the use of vouchers in the District of Columbia. Given that school choice has been around for three decades, there is an array of research on the effects of school choice.³³

Finally, the report excludes entirely any discussion of related research on reforms and policies gaining traction, such as expanded early education,³⁴ school-community partnerships,³⁵ ensuring adequate funding,³⁶ and the importance of access to a cadre of stable and effective

educators, including teachers, principals, and counselors.³⁷

V. Review of the Report's Methods

This report uses research findings selectively for political purposes,³⁸ in this case to make an argument for retaining test-based accountability systems coupled with external interventions and market-driven consequences as remedies for low school performance. Rather than rely on research evidence for its conclusions and recommendations, it depends on theories of how accountability and market strategies ought to work, without providing evidence on how they actually work or how they impact low-performing schools. One of the perplexing issues of the report is the contradictions. While at times it acknowledges the limited impact that test-based accountability systems have had on student performance, it continues to advocate for robust test-based accountability systems that expand the use of tests to gauge school performance. The report points out the flaws of test-based accountability systems, but rather than proposing solutions to these issues, the report simply blames educators whom they claim don't like the constraints imposed by testing regime. It provides no evidence on the efficacy of combining external interventions with market-driven consequences as reform strategies for improving low-performing schools, but recommends them anyway.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations are not substantiated by research evidence. It is an advocacy piece that relies on theories of test-based accountability and market-driven reforms rather than research evidence to provide a rationale for its conclusions and recommendations.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

An underlying problem for this report is that it fails to explain why these systems, which have been in place for three decades and failed to deliver what they promised, should be extended to include more testing at more grades. The report acknowledges that choice and externally mandated school improvements, turnarounds, and takeovers are not a sure bet, but recommend that *in combination*, intervention-style and marketplace-driven consequences will reinforce each other. It provides no evidence that this will indeed happen. This limits its usefulness for policymakers and practitioners who may be searching for proven approaches, based on research, to improve schools.

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