

America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future

Accountability requires standards for both inputs and outputs in order to address longstanding inequities in U.S. education.

By Linda Darling-Hammond

Creating schools that enable all children to learn requires the development of systems that enable all educators and schools to learn. At heart, this is a capacity-building enterprise leveraged by clear, meaningful learning goals and intelligent, reciprocal accountability systems that guarantee skillful teaching in well-designed, adequately resourced schools for all learners. It is not only possible but imperative that America close the achievement gap among its children by addressing the yawning opportunity gap that denies these fundamental rights. Given the critical importance of education for individual and societal success in the flat world we now inhabit, inequality in the provision of education is an antiquated tradition the United States can no longer afford. If No Child Left Behind is to be anything more than empty rhetoric, we will need a policy strategy that creates a 21st-century curriculum for

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all students and supports it with thoughtful assessments; access to knowledgeable, well-supported teachers; and equal access to school resources.

For the United States to make progress on its longstanding inequalities, we will need to make the case to each other that none of us benefits by keeping any of us ignorant, and, as a society, all of us profit from the full development of one another's abilities.

As the fate of individuals and nations is increasingly interdependent, the quest for access to an equitable, empowering education for all people has become a critical issue for the American nation as a whole. As a country, we can and must enter a new era. No society can thrive in a technological, knowl-

while tests can provide some of the information needed for an accountability system; they are not the system itself. Genuine accountability should heighten the probability of good practices occurring for all students, reduce the probability of harmful practice, and ensure that there are self-corrective mechanisms in the system — feedback, assessments, and incentives — that support continual improvement.

If education is actually to improve and the system is to be accountable to students, accountability should be focused on ensuring the competence of teachers and leaders, the quality of instruction, and the adequacy of resources, as well as the capacity of the system to trigger improvements. In addition to

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edge-based economy by depriving large segments of its population of learning. The path to our mutual well-being is built on educational opportunity. Central to our collective future is the recognition that our capacity to survive and thrive ultimately depends on ensuring to all of our people what should be an unquestioned entitlement — a rich and inalienable right to learn.

RECIPROCAL, INTELLIGENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Standards for student learning are meaningless unless they are accompanied by the means to ensure that they can indeed be met by students in all schools. Thus, policies that ensure students' opportunities to learn are as important a part of an accountable education system as are standards for student performance.

In the currently prevailing paradigm in the United States, accountability has been defined primarily as the administration of tests and the attachment of sanctions to low test scores. Yet, from a child and parent perspective, this approach does not ensure high-quality teaching each year; nor does it ensure that students have the courses, books, materials, support services, and other resources they need to learn. In this paradigm, two-way accountability does not exist: Although the child and the school are accountable to the state for test performance, the state is not accountable to the child or his school for providing adequate educational resources.

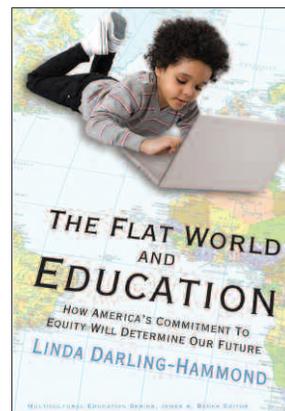
Furthermore, as we have seen, test-based accountability schemes have sometimes undermined education for the most vulnerable students by narrowing curriculum and by creating incentives to exclude low-achieving students in order to boost scores. Indeed,

standards of learning for students, which focus the system's efforts on meaningful goals, this will require *standards of practice* that can guide professional training, development, teaching, and management at the classroom, school, and system levels, and *opportunity to learn standards* that ensure appropriate resources to achieve the desired outcomes.

In addition to relevant, valid, and useful information about how individual students are doing and how schools are serving them, accountability should encompass how a school system hires, evaluates, and supports its staff, how it makes decisions, how it ensures that the best available knowledge will be acquired and used, how it evaluates its own functioning, and how it provides safeguards for student welfare.

This more complete conception is similar to what has been described as Finland's strategy of "reciprocal, intelligent accountability," in which:

schools are increasingly accountable for learning outcomes and education authorities are held accountable to schools for making expected outcomes possible. Intelligent accountability in the Finnish education context preserves and enhances trust among teachers, students, school leaders and education authorities in the accountability processes and involves them in the process, offering them a strong sense of professional responsibility and initiative. This has had a major positive impact on teaching and, hence, on student learning. (Sahlberg 2007)



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If new standards are to result in greater student learning, rather than greater levels of failure, accountability policies will need to ensure that teachers and other educators have the knowledge and skills they need to teach effectively to the new standards, help schools evaluate and reshape their practices, and put safeguards in place for students who attend failing schools.

STANDARDS OF PRACTICE: ENSURING PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

If students are to be expected to achieve higher standards, it stands to reason that educators must meet higher standards as well. They must know how to teach in ways that enable students to master challenging content and that address the special needs of

Professional accountability aims to ensure educators' competence through rigorous preparation, certification, selection, and evaluation of practitioners, as well as continuous professional learning and peer review of practice. It requires that educators make decisions on the basis of the best available professional knowledge; it also requires that they pledge their first commitment to the welfare of the client. Thus, rather than encouraging teaching that is procedure-oriented and rule-based, professional accountability seeks to create practices that are *client-oriented* and *knowledge-based*. Professional accountability seeks to ensure that all educators will have had access to profession-wide knowledge concerning best practices, not just what they picked up by themselves on the job; that they will have made a moral commitment to use this knowledge in the best interests of their students; and that they will continually seek to discover new knowledge and increasingly effective practices for themselves and their colleagues.

To achieve this, current ad hoc approaches to teacher and principal recruitment, preparation, licensing, hiring, and ongoing professional development must be reshaped so that all students will have access to teachers and school leaders who can be professionally accountable. This will require a serious overhaul of preparation and licensing standards so that they reflect the critical knowledge and skills for teaching, evaluated through high-quality performance assessments demonstrating that prospective teachers can actually teach effectively. It will require major investments in and greater accountability from teacher and leadership education programs, evaluated by the performance of their graduates on these assessments and other measures. And it will require more effective evaluation and professional learning systems in schools, so that tenure is earned based on demonstrated competence and ongoing assessment of practice, and outcomes guide expectations and supports for professional development.

STANDARDS FOR SCHOOLS: DEVELOPING ORGANIZATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Quality teaching depends not just on teachers' knowledge and skill but on the environments in which they work. Schools need to offer a coherent curriculum focused on higher-order thinking and performance across subject areas and grades; time for teachers to work intensively with students to accomplish challenging goals; opportunities for teachers to plan with and learn from one another; and regular occasions to evaluate the outcomes of their practices.

If schools are to become more responsible and responsive, they must, like other professional organizations, make evaluation and assessment part of

ARTICLE AT A GLANCE

Standards are not just for students. If all students are to have the opportunity to learn, then there must be standards for teachers, schools, districts, and states as well. Thus, in addition to *standards of learning* for students, there should be *standards of practice* that can guide professional training, development, teaching, and management at the classroom, school, and system levels, and *opportunity to learn standards* that ensure appropriate resources to achieve the desired outcomes. In this system of shared accountability, standards cannot be reduced to the administration of tests and the attachment of sanctions to low test scores.

To establish such a system, the No Child Left Behind Act will need to be revamped when it comes up for reauthorization in 2010. In particular, it needs to include incentives to encourage better assessments. To address these problems, Congress should fund an intensive development effort to develop, validate, and test high-quality performance assessments; encourage improvements in state and local assessment practice; and ensure more appropriate assessment for special education students and English language learners.

different learners. High and rigorous standards for teaching are a cornerstone of a professional accountability system focused on student learning. Professional accountability acknowledges that the only way we can ensure that students will be well taught is by ensuring that they have knowledgeable and committed teachers. As Lee Shulman has stated:

The teacher remains the key. The literature on effective schools is meaningless, debates over educational policy are moot, if the primary agents of instruction are incapable of performing their functions well. No microcomputer will replace them, no television system will clone and distribute them, no scripted lessons will direct and control them, no voucher system will bypass them. (Shulman 1983: 504)

their everyday lives. Just as hospitals have standing committees of staff that meet regularly to look at assessment data and discuss the effectiveness of each aspect of their work — a practice reinforced by their accreditation requirements — so schools must have regular occasions to examine their practices and effectiveness.

spectorate with U.S. educators, has been piloted in several states and cities, including New York, Rhode Island, and Chicago (Ancess 1996; Wilson 1995). The process has proved an extremely effective strategy for enabling schools to get an objective look at their practices, creating an evidence base that honors the broader goals of education and complements

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As Richard Rothstein and colleagues describe in *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right* (2008), school-level accountability can be supported by school inspections, like those common in many other nations, in which trained experts, usually highly respected former practitioners, evaluate schools by spending several days visiting classrooms, examining random samples of student work, and interviewing students about their understanding and their experiences, as well as looking at objective data such as test scores, graduation rates, and the like. In some cases, principals accompany inspectors into classrooms and are asked for their own evaluations of the lessons. In this way, inspectors are able to make judgments about the instructional and supervisory competence of principals. As described earlier, inspectors may also play a role in ensuring the quality and comparability of school-based assessments (as in England and Australia), as well as schools' internal assessment and evaluation processes (as in Hong Kong).

In most countries' inspection systems, schools are rated on the quality of instruction and other services and supports, as well as students' performance and progress on a wide range of dimensions including and going beyond academic subject areas, such as extracurriculars, personal and social responsibility, the acquisition of workplace skills, and the extent to which students are encouraged to adopt safe practices and a healthy lifestyle. Schools are rated as to whether they pass inspection, need modest improvements, or require serious intervention, and receive extensive feedback on what the inspectors both saw and recommend. Reports are publicly posted. Schools requiring intervention are then given more expert attention and support, and placed on a more frequent schedule of visits. Those that persistently fail to pass may be placed under local government control and could be closed if they are not improved.

An Americanized version of the inspectorate system, designed by former members of the British in-

test information, and providing diagnostics and recommendations that are essential for any serious improvement ultimately to occur. When practicing educators are among the members of the teams, they also learn directly about colleagues' practices and how to evaluate education in ways that travel back with them to their own schools, creating a learning system across the state. This approach could be developed by building on these efforts or by reconceptualizing current school accreditation to focus more directly on teaching and learning, with leadership from full-time trained experts who guide the work of the volunteer participants on teams that can, thus, be more consistent and effective.

STANDARDS FOR THE SYSTEM: CREATING SAFEGUARDS FOR STUDENTS

An effective intervention system for diagnosing and remedying the sources of school failure is an essential component of an accountability system that works for students. If teaching and learning are to improve, federal and state accountability efforts must be structured to enhance opportunities for school learning and professional development. They should also ensure that necessary resources — ranging from qualified teachers to curriculum materials — are put in place where schools are failing.

It is critical that state and federal efforts to recognize success and remedy failure be based on thoughtful, educationally sound means for identifying schools that are succeeding or failing. When incentives are triggered by simplistic measurements such as average school test scores, perverse incentives can be created that harm students. Measures need to be based on the growth and success of all students in the school and on educationally sound evaluations of

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In other developed countries, schools can focus primarily on providing education, rather than also having to provide breakfasts and lunches, to help families find housing and health care, or to deal with constant mobility due to evictions, the effects of untreated physical and mental illness, and the large gaps in children's readiness that exists at entry to school.

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school practices. The incentive structure must provide incentives for schools that provide high-quality education to be rewarded for opening their doors to the students who are in the greatest educational need and for supporting the spread of successful practices to other schools.

student learning. *School districts* would be responsible for distributing school resources equitably, hiring and supporting well-qualified teachers and administrators (and removing those who are not competent), and encouraging practices that support high-quality teaching and learning. *Schools* would

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A genuinely accountable system recognizes that school problems can be caused as much by district and state policies — including unequal funding, hiring and assignment of unqualified personnel, and counterproductive curriculum policies — as they are by conditions within the school. Thus, the responsibility for correcting school failings must be shared. When there are serious shortcomings in schools' practices and outcomes, states should involve expert teams in evaluating the root causes of school failure — including the qualifications of personnel, the nature of curriculum resources, student access to high-quality teaching, administrative strategies, organizational structures, and other essential aspects of students' experiences in school — and, with the district and school, develop a plan to correct them.

If policy changes are needed to implement a remedy or to ensure that the problems experienced by the school do not recur on a regular basis (in that school or in other schools), then the state and local district should also assume responsibility for developing new policies that are more supportive of school success and that ensure the protection of students' entitlement to high-quality education. Schools should have expert technical assistance to support their efforts to change. If they cannot do so successfully, however, with infusions of resources and help, they should be redesigned or closed, and their buildings used to house new school models created by educators who can design them for greater success.

In a system of shared accountability, *states* would be responsible for providing sufficient resources, for ensuring well-qualified personnel, and for adopting standards for

be accountable for creating a productive environment for learning, assessing the effectiveness of their practices, and helping staff and parents communicate with and learn from one another. *Teachers and other staff* would be accountable for identifying and meeting the needs of individual students as well as meeting professional standards of practice. Together with colleagues, they would continually assess and revise their strategies to better meet the needs of students.

REVAMPING NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) will be considered for reauthorization in 2010 and will have much to do with the accountability strategies adopted by states across the country. While problematic in its implementation, NCLB is a historic piece of legislation that has succeeded in drawing attention to the need for higher learning standards and greater equity in educational outcomes. By flagging differences in student performance by race and class, it shines a spotlight on long-standing inequalities that can trigger attention to the needs of students neglected in many schools. And by insisting that all students are entitled to qualified teachers, the law has stimulated important recruitment and retention efforts in states where low-income and "minority" students have experienced a revolving door of inexperienced, untrained teachers.

The goals of NCLB are the right ones; however, we have seen that the law's design and implementation have narrowed the curriculum, caused schools to abandon some successful programs, and created incentives for keeping and pushing low-achievers out of schools. In addition, its complex rules for showing "Adequate Yearly Progress" — which require schools to meet more than 30 separate testing targets annually — have labeled many successful and improving schools as failing, while preventing adequate attention to the truly failing schools that states should focus on. Because of a number of Catch 22s in the accountability formula, more than 80% of the nation's

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It is our continuing comfort with profound inequality that is the Achilles heel of American education.

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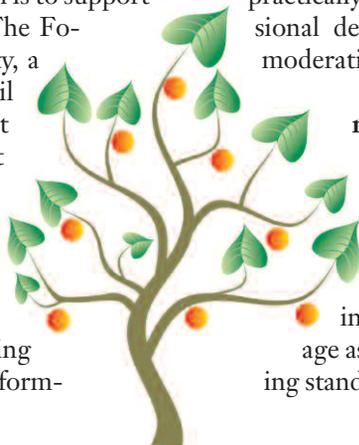
To survive and prosper, our society must finally renounce its obstinate commitment to educational inequality and embrace full and ambitious opportunities to learn for all of our children. Although education is a state responsibility, a new federal policy must finally address the deep and tenacious educational debt that holds our nation's future in hock, taking strong steps toward ensuring that every child has access to adequate school resources, facilities, and quality teachers.

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schools will have failed to “make AYP” by 2014 even if they are high-achieving or rapidly improving.

Hundreds of proposals for tweaking NCLB have been made, but a substantial paradigm shift is required if the nation’s education system is to support powerful learning for all students. The Forum on Education and Accountability, a group of over 100 education and civil rights organizations, has argued that “the law’s emphasis needs to shift from applying sanctions for failing to raise test scores to holding states and localities accountable for making the systemic changes that improve student achievement” (2004).

This should include encouraging thoughtful measures of student perform-



and introduce related, high-quality, locally administered performance assessments that evaluate critical thinking and applied skills. It should also support states in making such assessments reliable, valid, and practically feasible through teacher professional development and scorer training and moderation systems.

- **Ensure more appropriate assessment for special education students and English language learners** by underwriting efforts to develop, validate, and disseminate more appropriate assessments in the content areas for these students, and by ensuring that the law and regulations encourage assessments based on professional testing standards for these groups. This would in-

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ance that can support the kind of learning we need in schools and developing a better method for charting school progress. Although the current law calls for multiple measures and for assessing higher-order thinking skills, it lacks incentives to encourage better assessments. To address these problems, Congress should:

- **Fund an intensive development effort** that enables federal labs, centers, and universities in collaboration with states to develop, validate, and test high-quality performance assessments, and to train the field of practitioners — ranging from a new generation of state and local curriculum and assessment specialists to teachers and leaders — who can be involved in the development, administration, and scoring of these assessments in valid and reliable ways. The federal government should also fund high-quality research on the validity, reliability, instructional consequences, and equity consequences of these assessments.

- **Encourage improvements in state and local assessment practice.** To model high-quality test items and better measure the standards, the federal government should move the National Assessment of Educational Progress toward a more performance-oriented assessment, as it was when it was launched in the 1950s, with tasks that evaluate students’ abilities to solve problems, explain, and defend their ideas. The new Elementary and Secondary Education Act should provide incentives and funding for states to refine their state assessments

include helping develop and requiring the use of tests that are language-accessible for English language learners and appropriate for special education students, and evaluating their gains at all points along the achievement continuum.

A new set of measures is also essential for evaluating school progress. Currently, NCLB requires states to show 100% of students reaching “proficiency” by 2014, setting separate targets every year for subgroups defined by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language background, and special education status and labeling schools that meet any single target as failing to make AYP. It is impossible with the current metrics to distinguish, for example, between a school that shows little gain for its students on any of the tests and one that shows substantial gains for all groups but had a 94% testing participation rate on one test in one subject area, rather than the required 95%.

Furthermore, under current rules, all schools that serve English language learners will eventually be declared failing, because a Catch-22 provision in the law requires reaching 100% proficiency for this group but removes students from the subgroup after they

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Students’ willingness to commit to school and their own futures is interwoven with their perceptions about whether the society, their schools, and their teachers believe they are worthwhile investments — perceptions that enable them to invest in themselves. Thus, the more intangible aspects of school success — a student’s dedication to do what is needed to achieve and knowledge of how to do so — intersect with access to key resources like quality teachers and curriculum, as well as schools’ investments in those programs and practices that can leverage strong achievement.

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become proficient, making the target impossible to meet. Schools that serve a steady stream of new immigrants who are non-native English speakers are, by definition, unable to make AYP under the law, no matter how successful they are in helping their students learn English over time. In addition, as we have noted, the focus on increasing test outcomes alone has created incentives for schools to boost scores by keeping or pushing out low-scoring students, especially those with special needs and English language learners. School incentives should recognize the value of keeping students in school as well as improving learning.

To address these problems, Congress should replace the current “status model” for measuring school progress with a Continuous Progress Index that evaluates school progress on an index of measures that includes a range of assessments of student

learning along with school progression and graduation rates. Such an index would evaluate students’ growth over time, across the entire achievement continuum, thus focusing attention on progress in all students’ learning, not just on those who fall at the so-called “proficiency bubble.” This would recognize schools’ gains with students who score well below and above a single cut score and encourage more appropriate inclusion of special education students and English language learners. The index could accommodate state and local assessments of student learning that capture more complex inquiry and problem-solving skills. It could also include assessments of subject areas beyond reading and mathematics — such as writing, science, and history — which are important in their own right and essential to develop students’ knowledge and literacy skills as they are applied in the content areas.

A Continuous Progress Index would give schools a single challenging but realistic growth target to aim for each year for each student group (rather than 30 or 40 separate targets) — one that increases more

steeply for groups that are further behind, so that incentives focus both on raising the bar and closing the achievement gap. It would encourage schools’ attention to all students’ learning and allow for several kinds of important evidence about progress to be

considered in evaluating schools. It would also more clearly identify those that are truly failing, so that states can focus their resources for improvement where they are most needed, using a school quality review process, as described above, to diagnose school needs and to support more productive interventions.

Rather than placing all the onus of reform on the individual school, a revamped Elementary and Secondary Education Act would recognize that many of the sources of problems in failing schools are structural and systemic, rather than idiosyncratic, and that failing public schools in many states are seriously underfunded and grossly understaffed. In some cases, a majority of teachers are untrained and inexperienced, due to short-sighted and unaccountable licensing and hiring practices at the state and district levels. These schools are dumping grounds for the failures of the system. They are allowed to function in this way because they serve powerless minorities and constituencies without clout, and because the system must rob some Peter in order to pay some other Paul. The solution to their problems does not lie within the schools themselves, but with major structural changes within the system as a whole. Such changes will require honesty and courage in facing the educational dirty laundry that has been allowed to accumulate across the country, as well as foresight in adopting policies that seriously address the issues of educational equity, professional accountability, and systemwide restructuring. ■

From *The Flat World and Education*

The goals for education are changing rapidly, not only in the U.S. but around the world. Today’s expectation that schools will enable *all* students, rather than a small minority, to learn challenging skills to high levels creates an entirely new mission for schools. Rather than merely “covering the curriculum” or “getting through the book,” this new mission requires that schools substantially enrich the intellectual opportunities they offer while meeting the diverse needs of students who bring with them varying talents, interests, learning styles, cultures, predispositions, language backgrounds, family situations, and beliefs about themselves and about what school means for them. This demands not only more skillful teaching but contexts in which students can be well known, in which they experience a coherent curriculum that lets them learn essential concepts in ways that develop strong thinking skills.

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File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0912dar.pdf

Linda Darling-Hammond, America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 4, December 2009/January 2010, pp. 8-14.

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