

Bogus Accountability

Education accountability systems literally aren't designed to bring about accountability.

By Terry M. Moe

As the last century drew to a close, what made accountability so attractive was that, unlike mainstream reforms, it offered a coherent way of thinking about the problems plaguing the system and a plan for righting them.

Moreover, because it was a top-down approach — a demand for effective management that business leaders, governors, and the public could readily understand — it came across as a natural extension of mainstream reform efforts to make the existing system work better.

It was a reform that everyone could agree was desirable. Well, almost everyone.

The teachers' unions and their education allies had a very different view. For the goal of the accountability movement was to hold *them* (or their members) accountable, and that was something the unions wanted to avoid.

Historically, teachers and administrators have been granted substantial autonomy, and their pay and jobs have been almost totally secure, regardless of their performance. A very cushy arrangement.

So why would they want to have specific goals thrust upon them, their performance evaluated in a serious manner, their pay linked to performance, and their jobs made less secure? They wouldn't.

With accountability so popular, however, the unions and their allies found themselves in a political bind. Full-fledged opposition would have put them on the wrong side and pegged them as self-interested defenders of the status quo. This being so, they opted for a more sophisticated course of action: to "support" accountability, participate in its design — and block any components they found threatening.

From the unions' standpoint, most aspects of the typical accountability plan can be "supported" at little cost. After all, there is nothing about curriculum standards that is inherently threatening to union interests. The same can be said for tests of student achievement.

The unions insist that pay be determined by formal criteria — seniority, education — that are not measures (or causes) of how much students learn and that any teacher can satisfy. Bad teachers and good teachers get paid the same. No one has an economic incentive to perform.

When consequences are actually adopted (against their wishes), the unions do everything they can to ensure that they take the form of positive inducements — and thus more money in the hands of teachers and schools. There should be only winners. No losers.

Even for low-performing schools, the unions insist that the consequences be positive: more money, more training, more programs — things that

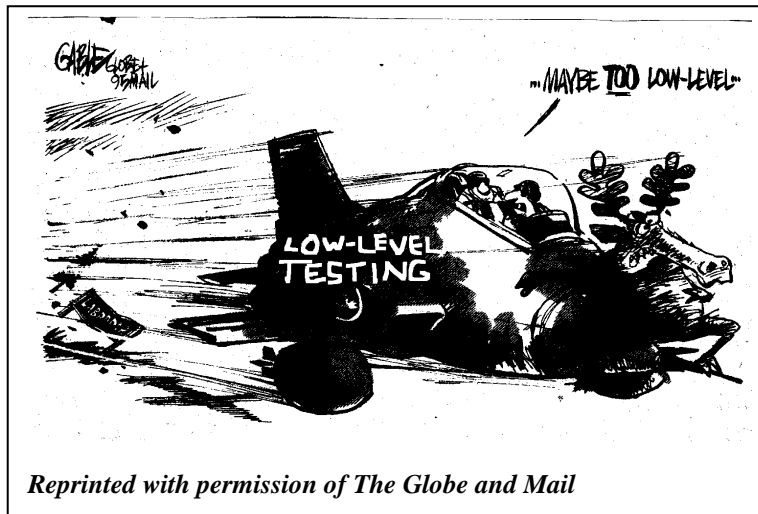
unions would be pressuring for anyway and that do nothing to promote the right incentives.

Because of union power, then, the politics of education tends to produce accountability systems in which the requirements of effective management are thoroughly violated.

The typical system includes no mechanisms to weed out poor teachers, no attempts to pay teachers based on their performance, no real sanctions for lower performance, and no logical connection between rewards and incentives.

The truth is, today's accountability systems are pale reflections of the real thing. They look like accountability systems. And they are called accountability systems. But they can't do their jobs very well, because they literally aren't designed to.

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True, standards that are truly rigorous can set teachers up for criticism (when students fail to meet them), and achievement tests can provide a devastatingly precise means of conveying the bad news. But this is why unions participate in the design process: to ensure that only "appropriate" standards and tests actually get adopted.

Standards and tests become truly threatening only when they are backed by formal consequences. The unions' prime goal is to see that this doesn't happen. Their highest priority is to ensure that there are no sanctions for poor performance, and above all that there is no weeding-out process by which the school system rids itself of mediocre or incompetent teachers.

Another union bugaboo is pay for performance, which in a genuine system of accountability would typically be the key means of rewarding productive behaviour, discouraging unproductive behaviour, and introducing proper incentives.