



# Educational Equity and Accountability

Paradigms, Policies, and Politics

**Linda Skrla**  
**James Joseph Scheurich**  
Editors

**Also available as a printed book  
see title verso for ISBN details**

# Educational Equity and Accountability

# STUDIES IN EDUCATION/POLITICS

Mark B.Ginsburg, Series Editor

THE POLITICS OF  
EDUCATORS' WORK AND LIVES  
edited by Mark B.Ginsburg

POLITICS, RACE, AND SCHOOLS  
*Racial Integration, 1954–1994*  
by Joseph Watras

POLITICS AND EDUCATION  
IN ISRAEL  
*Comparisons with the United States*  
by Shlomo Swirski

STAFF, PARENTS AND POLITICS  
IN HEADSTARTA *Case Study in*  
*Unequal Power,*  
*Knowledge and Material Resources*  
by Peggy A.Sissel

WHOSE EDUCATION FOR ALL?  
*Recolonization of the African Mind*  
by Birgit Brock-Utne

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY *Paradigms,*  
*Policies, and Politics*  
edited by Linda Skrla and James  
Joseph Scheurich

A CLASS ACT  
*Changing Teachers' Work,*  
*the State, and Globalization*  
by Susan L.Robertson

RETHINKING ACADEMIC  
POLITICS IN (RE)UNIFIED  
GERMANY AND THE  
UNITED STATES  
by John A.Weaver

RETHINKING ACADEMIC  
POLITICS IN (RE)UNIFIED  
GERMANY AND THE  
UNITED STATES  
by John A.Weaver

DEMOCRATIZING EDUCATION  
AND EDUCATING DEMOCRATIC  
CITIZENS  
*International and Historical*  
*Perspectives*  
edited by Leslie J.Limage

LIMITATIONS AND  
POSSIBILITIES  
OF DIALOGUE AMONG  
RESEARCHERS,  
POLICY MAKERS, AND  
PRACTITIONERS  
*International Perspectives on*  
*the Field of Education*  
edited by Mark B.Ginsburg and  
Jorge M.Gorostiaga

# **Educational Equity and Accountability**

*Paradigms, Policies, and Politics*

Linda Skrla  
James Joseph Scheurich

Editors

ROUTLEDGEFALMER  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Published in 2004 by  
RoutledgeFalmer  
29 West 35th Street  
New York, NY 10001  
[www.routledge-ny.com](http://www.routledge-ny.com)

Published in Great Britain by  
RoutledgeFalmer  
11 New Fetter Lane  
London EC4P 4EE  
[www.routledgefalmer.com](http://www.routledgefalmer.com)

Copyright © 2004 by Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

RoutledgeFalmer is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any other information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on file.

ISBN 0-203-46561-X Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-47264-0 (Adobe eReader Format)  
ISBN 0-415-94505-4 (hbk.)  
ISBN 0-415-94506-2 (pbk.)

# Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
1 Introduction LINDA SKRLAJAMES and JOSEPH SCHEURICH	1
<b>Part I: The Equity and Accountability Conversation</b>	
2 Thinking Carefully about Equity and Accountability JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH, LINDA SKRLA, and JOSEPH F.JOHNSON, JR.	13
3 Let’s Treat the Cause, Not the Symptoms: Equity and Accountability in Texas Revisited RICHARD R.VALENCIA, ANGELA VALENZUELA, KRIS SLOAN, and DOUGLAS E.FOLEY	29
4 Continuing the Conversation on Equity and Accountability: Listening Appreciatively, Responding Responsibly JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH and LINDA SKRLA	39
<b>Part II: The Effect of Accountability Policy on Educational Equity</b>	
5 Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice? LINDA SKRLA, JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH, JOSEPH F.JOHNSON, JR., and JAMES W.KOSCHORECK	51
6 Response to Skrla et al. The Illusion of Educational Equity in Texas: A Commentary on “Accountability for Equity” WALTER HANEY	81
7 Response to Skrla et al.: Is There a Connection between Educational Equity and Accountability? STEPHEN P.KLEIN	91
8 Complex and Contested Constructions of Accountability and Educational Equity	97

LINDA SKRLA, JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH, JOSEPH F. JOHNSON, JR., and JAMES W. KOSCHORECK

**Part III: Equity-Focused Research and Responses on Accountability**

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 9  | Displacing Deficit Thinking in School District Leadership<br>LINDA SKRLA and JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH  | 107 |
| 10 | Can State Accountability Systems Drive Improvements in School Performance for Children of Color and Children from Low-Income Homes?<br>EDWARD J. FULLER and JOSEPH F. JOHNSON, JR. | 131 |
| 11 | Accountability and Educational Equity in the Transformation of an Urban District<br>JAMES W. KOSCHORECK  | 153 |
| 12 | Using an Aligned System to Make Real Progress for Texas Students<br>SUSAN SCLAFANI   | 173 |
| 13 | Statewide Assessment Triggers Urban School Reform: But How High the Stakes for Urban Minorities?<br>LAURENCE PARKER  | 181 |
| 14 | Promoting Educational Equity in a Period of Growing Social Inequity: The Silent Contradictions of the Texas Reform Discourse<br>GARY L. ANDERSON                                   | 187 |
| 15 | Polar Positions on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS): Pragmatism and the Politics of Neglect<br>HENRY T. TRUEBA   | 199 |

**Part IV: Critiques and Commentaries on the Equity-Accountability Debate**

- |    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 16 | Educational Accountability for English Language Learners in Texas: A Retreat from Equity<br>WILLIAM R. BLACK and ANGELA VALENZUELA | 211 |
| 17 | The Unintended Consequences of the Texas Accountability System<br>KATHRYN BELL MCKENZIE  | 231 |
| 18 | Intersections in Accountability Reform: Complexity, Local Actors, Legitimacy, and Agendas<br>ANDREA K. RORRER                      | 245 |

19	Accountability for Special Education Students: Beginning Quality Education ANTOINETTE F. RIESTER-WOOD	261
20	Conclusion: Keeping Equity in the Foreground LINDA SKRLA and JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH	269
	Contributors	279
	Index	283



# Acknowledgments

One of the central themes of the scholarship collected in this edited volume is acknowledgment of the valuable contributions individuals with diverse viewpoints have made toward generating better and more complex understandings of the equity struggles that U.S. schools face in an age of accountability. It seems fitting, therefore, to begin this book by acknowledging the contributions others have made in helping us, the editors, with the significant struggles in our personal and professional lives.

First on the list is, of course, our families—sources of boundless love, support, encouragement, and patience for two academics whose work ethics seldom pay any attention to clocks or calendars. For Linda, this means love and thanks go to my husband Steve and to my three wonderful sons, Steve, Scott, and Eric. For Jim, this means the heart of my life, Jasper, Corinna, Patti, Roo, and Sammy.

Next, thanks to our colleagues in our respective departments of educational administration. For Linda, at Texas A&M University, I deeply appreciate the support, guidance, critique, laughter, and camaraderie of Yvonna Lincoln, Carolyn Clark, Patrick Slattery, Christine Stanley, Maricela Oliva, Jean Madsen, John Hoyle, David Erlandson, Luana Zellner, Bob Slater, Bryan Cole, Stan Carpenter, Maynard Bratlien, Steve Stark, Cliff Whetten, Julian Trevino, and Virginia Collier. Thanks also to my fabulous dean, Jane Close Conoley. For Jim, at The University of Texas at Austin, I appreciate the constant support and engagement of my colleagues, Jay Scribner, Pedro Reyes, Juanita Garcia, Norma Cantu, Martha Ovando, Bill Moore, John Roueche, Nolan Estes, Don Phelps, Jim Yates, Manny Justiz, Terry Clark, Michael Thomas, Marilyn Kameen, Lonnie Wagstaff, Bill Lasher, and Jim Duncan.

Appreciation also goes to the masters and doctoral students in our two departments, women and men who are out there on the “front lines” of the battle for equity and excellence every day in Texas public schools. We learn as much, or more, from them as we teach them.

We also are indebted to another group of educators—the leaders and staff members of the four school districts that opened their doors to the research upon which much of the content of this book is based. Our warmest appreciation to Aldine Independent School District (ISD) Brazosport ISD, San Benito Consolidated Independent School District (CISD) and Wichita Falls ISD.

Deepest appreciation also goes to Val Wilke and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation for their generous funding support for the research.

The next group to whom we want to express sincere thanks and appreciation is the scholars who have contributed their work to this edited volume. Some are friends and colleagues with whom we have close working relationships, and others we know primarily through their previously published critiques of our work, but we deeply appreciate the contributions all of them have made to what we think is an outstanding collection of research and commentary on one of the toughest topics in education today. So, thank you to: Gary Anderson, Bill Black, Doug Foley, Ed Fuller, Walt Haney, Joe Johnson, Stephen Klein, Jim Koschoreck, Kathryn McKenzie, Larry Parker, Toni Riester-Wood, Andrea Rorrer, Susan Sclafani, Kris Sloan, Henry Trueba, Richard Valencia, and Angela Valenzuela. Although her work does not appear here, thanks also to Linda McNeil, whose research inspired our commentary piece that appears in [chapter 2](#).

We also appreciate the assistance and encouragement provided by Mark Ginsburg, the series editor for RoutledgeFalmer's Studies in Education Politics series and by Joe Miranda, former Education Editor at RoutledgeFalmer.

Additionally, we would like to express our appreciation to the publishers of several journals for permission to reprint the previously published work listed below.

From *Phi Delta Kappan* (vol. 82, no. 4) ([www.pdkintl.org](http://www.pdkintl.org)):

[Chapter 2](#), "Thinking Carefully about Equity and Accountability," by James Joseph Scheurich, Linda Skrla, and Joseph F. Johnson, Jr.

From *Phi Delta Kappan* (vol. 83, no. 4):

[Chapter 3](#), "Let's Treat the Cause Not the Symptoms: Accountability and Equity in Texas Revisited," by Richard R. Valencia, Angela Valenzuela, Kris Sloan, and Douglas E. Foley.

[Chapter 4](#), "Continuing the Conversation on Equity and Accountability: Listening Appreciatively, Responding Responsibly," by James Joseph Scheurich and Linda Skrla.

From the *International Journal of Leadership in Education* (vol. 4, no. 3) published by Taylor and Francis ([www.taylorandfrancis.com](http://www.taylorandfrancis.com)):

[Chapter 5](#), "Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice?" by Linda Skrla, James Joseph Scheurich, Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., and James W. Koschoreck.

[Chapter 6](#), "Response to Skrla et al. The Illusion of Educational Equity in Texas: A Commentary on 'Accountability for Equity,'" by Walter Haney.

[Chapter 7](#), "Response to Skrla et al.: Is There a Connection between Educational Equity and Accountability?" by Stephen Klein.

[Chapter 8](#), "Complex and Contested Constructions of Accountability and Educational Equity," by Linda Skrla, James Joseph Scheurich, Joseph F. Johnson, Jr., and James W. Koschoreck.

From *Education and Urban Society* (vol. 33, no. 3) published by Corwin Press, a subsidiary of Sage Publications ([www.sagepub.com](http://www.sagepub.com)):

**Chapter 9**, “Displacing Deficit Thinking in School District Leadership,” by Linda Skrla and James Joseph Scheurich.

**Chapter 10**, “Can State Accountability Systems Drive Improvements in School Performance for Children of Color and Children from Low-Income Homes?” by Edward J.Fuller and Joseph F.Johnson, Jr.

**Chapter 11**, “Accountability and Educational Equity in the Transformation of an Urban District,” by James W.Koschoreck.

**Chapter 12**, “Using an Aligned System to Make Real Progress for Texas Students,” by Susan Sclafani.

**Chapter 13**, “Statewide Assessment Triggers Urban School Reform: But How High the Stakes for Urban Minorities?” by Laurence Parker.

**Chapter 14**, “Promoting Educational Equity in a Period of Growing Social Inequity: The Silent Contradictions of the Texas Reform Discourse,” by Gary L.Anderson.

**Chapter 15**, “Polar Positions on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS): Pragmatism and the Politics of Neglect,” by Henry T.Trueba.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

LINDA SKRLA AND JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH

High-stakes school accountability policy has assumed a prominent place at the forefront of educational policy debates in the United States and in other Western liberal democratic nations, such as the U.K., Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden (Apple, 1998). In the U.S., intense political attention recently has been focused on accountability, on standardized testing, and on the equity effects of both accountability and testing. Though this attention has escalated significantly within the past decade, accountability systems and their equity effects are all issues that have long, complex, and contested histories in U.S. political, social, and policy arenas (Popkewitz, 2000). Additionally, both the policies and the equity effects are dynamic (changing over time) and are designed and implemented differently at different levels (federal, state, and local) and sites. (In fact, it could be said that all education policy virtually always gets implemented differently at different levels and sites, as even teachers can be seen as “street-level bureaucrats” who make their own reinterpretation of education policies; see Lipsky, 1980.)

Unfortunately, however, the great majority of recent debate about educational equity and accountability in U.S. education policy circles has failed to attend to either the dynamism or complexity of these issues and has, instead, been carried out in a dualistic, good v. evil, fashion—characteristic of a situation Carl Glickman (2001) described as the “single truth wars” in U.S. educational research. In contrast, although some of the chapter authors strongly advocate for various positions or perspectives, this book, taken as a whole, is intended to move beyond a counterproductive insistence on a single truth and, instead, to push the discourse about accountability, testing, and educational equity in public schools usefully forward.

To set the stage for this forward movement, it must be understood that there is a broad range of conflicting and contradictory empirical evidence and opinion about the issues of accountability, testing, and equity. In this introductory chapter, we first review some of the major themes that appear in this evidence that circulates in current political discourse. Our purpose in doing this is to provide a framework for the more expanded discussion of these issues that appears in the body of the book. We then outline briefly the content contained in the chapters that comprise the book’s four parts.

### **Education Equity and Accountability: The Current Debate**

As was previously mentioned, accountability is the hottest issue at the center of contemporary politics of education in the United States. As *Education Week's* Lynn Olson (1999) argued, "These days, it can be summed up in one word: accountability.... In more and more states, policymakers are moving to reward success and punish failure in an effort to ensure that children are getting a good education" (p. 8). Furthermore, the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)* in January, 2002, has added considerable federal pressure to what had already become a policy behemoth at the state level, as the following excerpt from the *NCLB* executive summary makes clear:

The *NCLB Act* will strengthen Title I accountability by requiring States to implement statewide accountability systems covering all public schools and students. These systems must be based on challenging State standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in Grades 3–8, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. Assessment results and State progress objectives must be broken out by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group is left behind. School districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals will, over time, be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring measures aimed at getting them back on course to meet State standards. (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, ¶4)

In this policy language, the U.S. Department of Education's intent is unambiguous—to use accountability policy based on race and class disaggregation and based on an enforced constant decrease in the related achievement gaps as a vehicle to increase educational equity.

There is, however, little consensus among researchers and policy analysts about the educational equity effects of this use of accountability. In fact, a substantial body of empirical research, policy analysis, and commentary has accumulated within the past decade at various points along what could be considered a continuum that ranges from negative to positive effects with mixed results in between these two extremes.

#### *Accountability Policy Promotes Equity*

On the positive end of this continuum, significant support exists among some legislators, policy makers, business leaders, researchers, policy analysts, educators, civil rights and advocacy groups, and parents for the viewpoint that accountability systems can play a key role in closing the achievement gap that historically has existed between the academic performance of White and middle-

class children and that of children of color and children from low-income homes. For example, Gloria Ladson-Billings, in a 2002 talk given at the Austin, Texas, ISD Leadership Academy to students of the Academy, expressed support for accountability serving increased equity, though she also suggested that these systems are far from perfect. Similarly, civil rights scholar William Taylor (2000) made the case for accountability's utility as an equity tool in *Education Week*:

Past attempts at improving the quality of education have failed because, in the absence of standards and accountability, prejudice and low expectations could invisibly undermine minority achievement. For too many years, minority students have been quietly tracked out of high-level and college-preparatory courses, while the academic rigor of the courses they do attend has been watered down.... The growing state standards movement...recognizes the need for uniform measures of student progress to ensure that education officials stop excusing inferior education for the very children who need high-quality schooling the most. Today, new forms of accountability and assessment are the best tools we have to ensure quality education for all children. When schools and districts are held accountable for the achievement of all students, the means are at hand to force them to improve the quality of schooling provided for previously neglected students. Standards and accountability expose the sham that passes for education in many heavily minority schools and provide measurements and pressure to prod schools to target resources where they are needed most. (p. 56)

In addition, the point that accountability and standardized testing can reveal the deep inequity structured within traditional models and methods of schooling and force educators to make improvements is one that some research on individual schools and school districts has also supported. Examples of such productive use of accountability policy can be found in the work of Cawelti (2001), McAdams (2000), and Shirley (1997), among others (including our own work, which is discussed in detail in subsequent chapters).

### *Accountability Policy Has Mixed Effects on Equity*

Though some studies have produced findings that are mostly positive about the equity effects of accountability policy, such as those cited above, other studies have reported mixed effects. For example, Chandra Muller and Kathryn Schiller (2000) used hierarchical linear modeling to study the effects of state testing policy on educational attainment for students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds across the United States and found that the effects were varied and complex:

States' testing policies have complex relationships with key schooling processes that affect student attainment. Furthermore, these policies appear to operate in multiple ways, varying both in their effects on different types of students and on different measures of attainment.... While average levels of educational attainment vary between states with different policies, so do differences within states between students based on their family background, curricular positions, and teacher assessments. Thus, rather than leveling the playing field, the consequences of some policies may be to both amplify and attenuate stratification. However, even when stratification increases, the attainment of all students may improve under some conditions, (p. 24)

Muller and Schiller's study, which used National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data from 1988–92, is but one example of research that produced complex findings about accountability and equity.

Other examples include Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon, and Easton's (2000) research on Chicago's "no social promotion" policy that found mixed effects from retaining elementary students who failed state achievement exams. Likewise, Carnoy, Loeb, and Smith (2000) reached completely opposite conclusions from examination of Texas drop-out data in relation to accountability policy as did Haney (2000), who is represented in this volume.

### *Accountability Policy Damages Equity*

On the opposite, negative end of the spectrum, there have been numerous studies reporting primarily negative findings about the effects of accountability and standardized testing on educational equity. Linda McNeil's (2000) study of magnet schools in Houston, for example, revealed a "deskilling" of teachers that occurred as a result of prescriptive practices driven by accountability.

Other evidence of accountability policy's detrimental effects on educational equity has indicated that in some circumstances, such policy narrows curriculum, stresses teachers and students, unfairly targets students who have had unequal access to challenging curricula and quality teaching (most often students of color and students from low-income homes), and results in unproductive use of school resources, among other effects (see, for example, Horn & Kincheloe, 2001; Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). Additionally, several prominent scholars of color have taken strong stands against accountability policy based on its potentially negative effects on children of color. For example, Beverly Gordon (2000) wrote: "I have no doubt that many children of color as well as poor and working class White children will be relegated to the second class status of failing guaranteed by the high stakes consequences of these high stakes tests" (p. 3). Similar perspectives have been expressed by Angela Valenzuela, whose work is included in this volume.

## Overview of the Chapters

The paradigmatic, policy, and political dimensions of this apparently contradictory body of research about the educational equity effects of accountability policy are taken up in much greater detail in the chapters that form the four main parts of the book. In these chapters, we (the editors) engage in substantive debate with other prominent scholars who hold a range of perspectives on educational equity and accountability issues. Along with our colleagues and critics, we explore the equity-accountability debate with a particular focus on a Texas accountability policy using empirical research conducted in Texas schools and school districts.

The primary motivation for our focus on Texas is that it is a site of particular relevance and importance in contemporary political U.S. political debates over accountability and educational equity. First, the state has demonstrated consistent, sustained, improved performance for its children of color on several measures of academic achievement over the past decade. These test score gains have been the subject of several widely circulated policy studies that have produced conflicting findings (see, for example, Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000, and Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). Second, Texas was the site of a national test-case civil rights lawsuit that challenged the constitutionality of the state's graduation test (*G.I. Forum v. Moses*), which was backed by respected activist groups such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF). Third, Texas accountability policy has received high marks from national policy evaluation groups and many components of it served as models for the *NCLB* legislation, which all 50 states are currently struggling to implement (Achieve, Inc., 2002; Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002).

### *Part I: The Equity and Accountability Conversation*

**Part I** contains three chapters that address the polarized nature of the research conversation about U.S. accountability policy and its effects on educational equity. The section begins with [chapter 2](#), “Thinking Carefully about Equity and Accountability,” in which the two editors, writing in collaboration with our colleague, Joseph Johnson, Jr., make a case for an urgent need to carefully consider the full range of issues surrounding educational equity and accountability policy. This chapter describes three historic possibilities for centering equity issues in national policy and political arenas and suggests a five-category schema for educational research and policy analysis on the connections between accountability and educational equity.

The next chapter, “Let’s Treat the Cause, Not the Symptoms: Equity and Accountability in Texas Revisited” ([chapter 3](#)), was written by Richard Valencia, Angela Valenzuela, Kris Sloan, and Douglas Foley in response to the arguments outlined in [chapter 2](#). The [chapter 3](#) authors point out their view of flaws in the historic possibility thesis presented in the earlier chapter, raise



several additional areas of concern, and argue for their own vision of equity and accountability based on the work of the Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE).

The final chapter in [Part I, chapter 4](#), is “Continuing the Conversation on Equity and Accountability,” which was written by the two editors. This chapter is a rejoinder to the viewpoints expressed in [chapter 3](#). In it, we disagree with some of the criticism in the prior chapter, agree with some, but, most importantly, attempt to model a format for elevating the conversation about equity and accountability to a higher and more respectful plane by demonstrating openness to and learning from critique.

*Part II: The Effect of Accountability Policy on Educational Equity*

[Part II](#) contains a series of four chapters that discuss the theoretical and practical possibilities of accountability policy for leveraging educational equity. This section begins with [chapter 5](#), “Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice,” written by the editors along with colleagues Joseph Johnson, Jr. and James Koschoreck. In this chapter, the authors advocate working toward a vision of social justice in U.S. schools through tactical engagement with accountability policy in a way that acknowledges the complexities surrounding issues of accountability and social justice. They discuss the systemic racism that is pervasive in U.S. schools, outline the debates surrounding accountability and equity, and explore the possibility of a convergence of interests between supporters of accountability and advocates for social justice.

[Chapter 6](#), “Response to Skrla et al. The Illusion of Educational Equity in Texas: A Commentary on ‘Accountability for Equity,’” is written by Walter Haney. Haney, a prominent and prolific critic of accountability policy, responds to the arguments set forth in [chapter 5](#). He maintains, among other points, that evidence of improved and more equitable student performance in Texas is refuted by evidence of rising drop-out rates among students of color and increasing 9th grade retention rates.

[Chapter 7](#), “Response to Skrla et al: Is There a Connection between Educational Equity and Accountability?,” is written by Stephen Klein. Klein provides a second response to the argument laid out in [chapter 5](#) that accountability can leverage educational equity. The basis for his response is a study he conducted along with several colleagues at RAND that indicated that National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for Texas did not show a closing of the gap in performance between White students and students of color.

In the final chapter in [Part II](#), “Complex and Contested Constructions of Accountability and Educational Equity” the editors, writing with Johnson and Koschoreck, provide a rejoinder to Haney’s and Klein’s critiques found in

chapters 6 and 7. We argue that the data both Haney and Klein use to support their arguments are contested by other research findings and repeat our earlier call for a research conversation that attends to the complexity of the evidence and avoids polarized positions.

*Part III: Equity-Focused Research and Responses on  
Accountability*

**Part III** contains a series of seven chapters. Three of the chapters present the results of research on accountability policy's positive effects at the state and school district levels, and four of the chapters contain commentary and critique on the research presented. This section begins with **chapter 9**, "Displacing Deficit Thinking in School District Leadership." In this chapter, the editors discuss the process by which state accountability changed the leadership beliefs and practices of five Texas public school superintendents. The findings explored here were drawn from a larger, multi-year, grant-funded research project in four Texas districts that had demonstrated sustained, substantially improved academic achievement for children of color and children from low-income homes in their districts (see Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000).

In **chapter 10**, "Can State Accountability Systems Drive Improvements in School Performance for Children of Color and Children from LowIncome Homes?," Edward Fuller and Joseph Johnson, Jr. explore a variety of student performance measures in Texas over the past decade that show improvements in school performance for children of color and children from low-income homes. Among the data discussed are Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) scores, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, college entrance examinations (SAT & ACT), exemptions from testing, and drop-out rates.

**Chapter 11**, "Accountability and Educational Equity in the Transformation of an Urban District" is written by James W. Koschoreck. This chapter is based on the same research project discussed in **chapter 9**. Koschoreck's work, however, focuses on a single case study. Rather than looking across the four districts that participated in the study, he examines in-depth the effects of accountability on the transformation of a single urban school district, Aldine ISD.

**Chapter 12**, "Using an Aligned System to Make Real Progress for Texas Students" is the first of four responses to the work contained in chapters 9, 10, and 11. It is written by Susan Sclafani, former Chief of Staff for Houston ISD, who is currently serving as Counselor to U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige. Sclafani presents an urban practitioner's reaction to the arguments set forth in chapters 9, 10, and 11. As part of her reaction to the discussions of accountability contained in these chapters, she recounts Houston ISD's experiences with accountability and makes the case that high levels of learning for literally all students has become the new civil right.

“Statewide Assessment Triggers Urban School Reform: But How High the Stakes for Urban Minorities?” [chapter 13](#), is written by Laurence Parker. This chapter uses critical race theory to critique the three research studies presented in [chapters 9, 10, and 11](#). He discusses the larger issues of accountability, testing, and educational equity in relation to racism. Parker raises questions about the viability of interest convergence theory in arguing for the utility of accountability in leveraging equity and also points out that the interaction of race and gender needs to be examined. For example, is accountability having positive effects on African-American girls but not African-American boys? As Parker points out, no one seems to be paying attention to this critical issue.

In [chapter 14](#), “Promoting Educational Equity in a Period of Growing Social Inequity: The Silent Contradictions of the Texas Reform Discourse,” Gary Anderson argues as a critical theorist that the most useful discussion of accountability, testing, and educational equity should occur at the conceptual level rather than at the level of conflicting individual studies. He also problematizes the absence of discussion of larger societal inequities, such as economic and social justice, in the debate over improved school achievement and considers the utility of pursuing educational equity strategically in times of corporatization and political conservatism.

[Chapter 15](#), “Polar Positions on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS): Pragmatism and the Politics of Neglect” is written by Henry Trueba. This chapter was originally written as the concluding article to [chapters 9 through 14](#) for a special issue of the journal, *Education and Urban Society*. From the vantage-point of his long career as a critical ethnographer, Trueba problematizes the pro-accountability arguments used by the authors of [chapters 9, 10, and 11](#). Additionally, he raises some troubling questions for the critics of accountability and testing.

#### *Part IV: Critiques and Commentaries on the Equity-Accountability Debate*

This section contains commentary pieces on the equity-accountability debate as detailed in the first 15 chapters. The authors of the five chapters in this section represent a range of paradigmatic and political views on this topic. The first chapter in this section, [chapter 16](#), “Educational Accountability for English Language Learners in Texas: A Retreat from Equity” is written by William Black, a doctoral student, and Angela Valenzuela, author of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) award-winning book, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. Black and Valenzuela detail and critique the development of Texas accountability policy as it relates to students who are English language learners.

[Chapter 17](#), “The Unintended Consequences of the Texas Accountability System,” contains commentary from a practitioner perspective; it is written by Kathryn McKenzie, who was (until 2003) Deputy Director of the Austin ISD

Leadership Academy. McKenzie offers her view of some of the positives associated with accountability in Texas and provides a more detailed analysis of some of the negative unintended consequences that she has observed.

The author of [chapter 18](#), “Intersections in Accountability Reform: Complexity, Local Actors, Legitimacy, and Agendas,” Andrea Rorrer, provides perspectives on the accountability-equity debate from her experience with the Texas Education Agency and from her research with highly successful school districts in Texas and North Carolina.

In [Chapter 19](#), “Accountability for Special Education Students: Beginning Quality Education,” another practitioner, Antoinette Riester-Wood, brings to bear the viewpoints from special education on issues related to accountability and educational equity and discusses her research on elementary schools that have been successful with educating diverse students with disabilities.

[Chapter 20](#), “Keeping Equity in the Foreground,” is the concluding chapter for this section and for the entire book. In it, the editors summarize key themes, reiterate central arguments, and discuss three central arenas in the probable future of the equity-accountability debate.

## References

- Achieve, Inc. (2002). *Three paths one destination: Standards-based reform in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Texas*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Apple, M.W. (1998). Are markets and standards democratic? *Educational Researcher*, 27 (6), 24–29.
- Carnoy, M., Loeb, S., & Smith, T.L. (2000). *Do higher state test scores in Texas make for better high school outcomes?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Cawelti, G. (2001). *High student achievement: How six school districts changed into high-performance systems*. Arlington, VA: Education Research Service.
- Glickman, C.D. (2001). Dichotomizing education: Why no one wins and America loses. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83(2), 147–52.
- Gordon, B.M. (2000, Autumn). On high stakes testing. *Division Generator*, 1–4.
- Grissmer, D., Flanagan, A., Kawata, J., & Williamson, S. (2000). *Improving student achievement: What NAEP state test scores tell us*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Haney, W. (2000). The myth of the Texas miracle in education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8(41). Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41/>
- Horn, R.A., & Kincheloe, J.L. (2001). *American standards: Quality education in a complex world: The Texas case*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Klein, S.P., Hamilton, L.S., McCaffrey, D.F., & Stecher, B.M. (2000). *What do test scores in Texas tell us?* (Issue Paper 202). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Linn, R.L., Baker, L., & Betebenner, D.W. (2002). Accountability systems: Implications of requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. *Educational Researcher* 31 (6), 3–16.

- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- McAdams, D.R. (2000). *Fighting to save our urban schools...and winning: Lessons from Houston*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McNeil, L.M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- Muller, C., & Schiller, K.S. (2000). *Leveling the playing field? Students' educational attainment and states' performance testing*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Olson, L. (1999). Shining a spotlight on results. *Education Week*, 17(17), 8–10.
- Orfield, G., & Kornhaber, M. (2001). *Raising standards or raising barriers?: Inequality and high stakes testing in public education*. Washington, DC: Century Foundation Press.
- Popkewitz, T.S. (2000). The denial of change in educational change: Systems of ideas in the construction of national policy and evaluation. *Educational Researcher*, 29(1), 17–29.
- Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Bacon, J., & Easton, J.Q. (2000). *Update: Ending social promotion*. Chicago, IL: Consortium for Chicago School Research.
- Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement-focused school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center.
- Taylor, W.L. (2000). Standards, tests, and civil rights. *Education Week* 20(11), 56, 40–41.
- Whitty, G., Power, S., & Halpin, D. (1998). *Devolution and choice in education: The school, the state and the market*. Bristol, PA: Open University Press.

# **PART I**

## **The Equity and Accountability Conversation**



## **CHAPTER 2**

# **Thinking Carefully about Equity and Accountability**

**JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH, LINDA SKRLA, AND  
JOSEPH F. JOHNSON, JR.**

Recent discourse on state accountability systems unfortunately appears to have devolved into a strict dichotomy in which accountability is either “all good” or “all bad.” Of particular concern in these polarized debates are questions of equity, notably in what ways accountability systems affect the education of low-income children of all races, but especially children of color. For example, the Texas accountability system, which has recently been the most widely discussed system, is purported to be either a “miracle” or an “illusion” with regard to its effects on low-income children (see, for example Orfield & Wald, 2000; Haney, 2000). What is more, each side has actual data to support its conclusions.

On one hand, there is a range of data from which it is possible to conclude that some state accountability systems have improved student achievement in general and the achievement of low-income children in particular. For example, over the past five years, we and some of our colleagues have studied schools and districts that are successfully serving primarily low-income children of color throughout the state of Texas.<sup>1</sup> Virtually all of these schools and districts have used the accountability system in positive ways. In addition, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for Texas and North Carolina appear to verify significant improvements in the achievement of low-income children and children of color (Grissmer & Flanagan, 1998).

On the other hand, there is a range of data from which it is possible to conclude that some of these state systems have actually hurt the education of children of color. For example, Linda McNeil (2000), drawing on her own case studies, has concluded that the Texas accountability system is deskilling teachers and narrowing the curriculum, particularly in schools serving low-income children. In addition, Walter Haney (2000) has argued that the Texas accountability system is increasing drop-out rates among children of color. Thus it is clear that each side in this debate on the equity effects of accountability systems can legitimately quote real and accurate data to support its conclusions.

We believe it is also clear that focusing on the equity effects of these systems is crucial. The apparent inability of our public education system to be as successful academically with children of color, particularly with those from low-income families, as it is with middle-class White children is a direct threat to our



claims to be a truly democratic country. Certainly it is possible to argue that a goal of equal success for all has always existed in the public education system. But the data are clear. We have posted a miserable academic record with the great majority of low-income children and children of color specifically.

In fact, many educators, not wanting to conclude that it is we who may have failed, have simply settled for not being successful with these children. Many of us have become hopeless, have given up, and have learned to accept inequitable achievement as a fact of life in thousands of classrooms from pre-kindergarten to the university. We come to our classrooms, we teach, and we get paid. But somewhere along the line we have lost a strong belief that we could successfully teach those whom Lisa Delpit (1988) refers to as “other people’s children.” And this solidified belief that low-income children and children of color are not likely to do well academically—what Richard Valencia (1997) has called “deficit thinking” or what Angela Valenzuela (1999) has called “subtractive schooling”—became the dominant norm for us educators.

For example, a White female central office administrator said to us:

I was in a school that probably, the last year I was there, had a 24% passing rate on TAAS [Texas Assessment of Academic Skills]. But that was okay because that was the best we could do and the best the kids would, could do, and we didn’t have the expectations for them.... I was as guilty as anybody in thinking that I was doing everybody a favor by teaching in a school that had large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. And they weren’t expected to be academically on top because of their other problems.<sup>2</sup>

Making the same point about such biases, an African-American, male school board member told us, “We’ve had to, and we’re still working on it, get teachers that don’t judge the students by their race or socioeconomic class when they walk in the room and say it looks like he can learn or she can learn.” Unfortunately, for many educators, the belief that children of color and low-income children cannot learn as well as others has become accepted as fact.

Nonetheless, whatever explanations we might offer for this belief and for the race and socioeconomic class inequalities in our public-education system, to abandon the pursuit of equity in our public schools is to undermine the dream that Martin Luther King, Jr. verbalized so well and that Ronald Edmonds kept repeating. Many have struggled over the centuries to bring that democratic dream closer to reality, and these struggles continue in education today through our efforts to overcome the inequalities of the public-education system.

These struggles over racial inequity in public education have been brought to prominence in this historical moment by state accountability systems. This is not to say that these systems are the sole or even the best public policy issues around which to debate matters of equity. Just as there are different explanations for what has caused and continues to cause inequities in education, different

solutions have been proposed. However, no matter what each of us values as the most important pathway to equity, educational accountability has become the primary public space in which most of the discussion of racial inequities in public education is now occurring. Thus it is critical that we carry on this public discourse carefully and thoughtfully.

Based on the past 5 years of our experience in studying, presenting, and writing about accountability and about schools and districts that are highly successful with low-income children and children of color, we strongly believe that we all need to be exceedingly careful about totally rejecting the equity possibilities of these accountability systems based on any particular set of data. Why? We must be careful because, however flawed and imperfect these systems are and however much they need to be improved, three highly significant and even historic possibilities have emerged from our efforts to construct these systems.

### **Three Historic Possibilities**

First, we must ask, In what prior historical moment has there been such a high level of public attention paid to the public schools' lack of success with low-income children and children of color? Our lack of academic success in educating children of color and low-income children has now become visible in the most public way.

Before we began receiving feedback from these accountability systems, even we educators thought we were being more successful with low-income children than we actually were. One White male superintendent in Texas, who leads a district that has made enormous strides in educating "other people's children," was very frank with us in one of our research interviews.

We didn't have the data that showed that not everybody was performing at the level that they're performing at today. We never disaggregated test scores 10 years ago. We had a Black valedictorian at one high school who went on to be the number-one student at the Naval Academy. We had some Hispanic kids who were just outstanding students, but you look at that and say, well yeah, Hispanic kids are getting a fair shake because we've got Hispanic kids who are doing great. No, they weren't, because we didn't look at the data. We didn't have the data to disaggregate to look at. We began to look at—we were forced to look at—the data. We began to look at it and look at it very closely. With the data that we were required to look at—and I say required, because we probably would not have looked at it if it hadn't have been for that accountability system going in—we could then see how poorly we were succeeding with Black and Hispanic children.

Of course, many educators and scholars, particularly scholars and educators of color, have persistently been focusing on this lack of success for decades. But it

has never before been made so clear, pushed so far into the spotlight, for both educators and the public.

Second, in what historical moment has there ever been a major public commitment to high academic performance for all races and socioeconomic classes of students by both major U.S. political parties and their candidates for president? In our view, this commitment by both parties to educate all children well, including low-income children of all races is historic. Such a national commitment has never existed at all, let alone achieved such a high public profile. And it is this kind of strong public commitment by a broad range of political actors that makes a change in a social norm possible.

For example, in Texas, there have been more than 10 years of strong support for academic success for all children from Democratic and Republican governors and legislators and from the Texas Business Education Coalition (composed of many of the most influential corporations). As the executive director of this coalition, John Stevens, said to one of us, “We are interested in ending the bell curve in education that always leaves minority children at the low end.” As a result of this broad and persistent support, all schools and their districts—and their public reputations—are directly dependent on the academic success of all their students, including Hispanic students, African-American students, and all low-income students. In other words, the scores of each racial group and those of low-income students as a group (including all races) are separately examined for every school and district. Thus a district can be blowing the top off the tests with its middle-class White students but find itself in serious trouble and facing real consequences for not being equally successful with its students of color and its students from low-income families. And these consequences apply whether or not these latter students are a small or large proportion of the school’s student population.

Indeed, if 15 years ago we had argued that the leadership of both major parties and the most influential business leaders in the state of Texas would someday be strongly and persistently pushing for school success for children of color and poor children, we would have been labeled as seriously out of touch. Of course, many of these leaders have seen the demographic writing on the wall. Students of color are already the majority (or soon will be) in some states, and these business leaders understand that the economic future of these states and their quality of life will depend on these students. But whatever the motives of various political actors, this legally mandated requirement for success with literally all students would not exist without the continuous support of both major parties and of other powerful political actors.

The third historic consequence of these accountability systems is the substantially improved academic success of children of color and low-income students and the substantially improved equity in some schools and districts in some states. Let us emphasize: in some schools and districts in some states. And yes, there are serious, legitimate questions about the tests in all states. And yes, many schools and districts are responding to their state-accountability systems in

very negative ways and so decreasing equity. But we who have been focused primarily on studying schools and districts that are highly successful academically with children of color and low-income children are finding a steadily increasing number of such schools and districts. Those schools and districts are also steadily decreasing the academic differences between middle-class White children and low-income children of all races.

When we first started researching these successful Texas schools 5 years ago, there were only a few. But each year there are more and more. Initially, it was largely elementary schools that were achieving this success, but now we are seeing an increasing number of secondary schools doing the same. And then, three years ago, we started noticing that there were whole districts that were experiencing considerable success with their low-income children of all races.<sup>3</sup> Three years ago, we had a list of 10 districts. Last year, we had a list of 30 or so. And the number is continuing to grow.

This does not mean that there are not plenty of negative examples to be found in Texas and elsewhere. This also does not mean that all the successful districts we have identified are “perfect” across the board. But even the severest critic of accountability systems would be strongly impressed by what we have found in many schools that serve predominantly low-income children. Some of these schools, many of which enroll 90% or more low-income children of color, started with low-level goals on the state tests. Indeed, some of them started with only 15 to 25% of their low-income children passing the state tests. However, when the educators at these schools found that they could achieve more basic goals, they set their sights higher. They were no longer content with the state passing standard of 70% on the state tests; some raised their goals to levels higher than that required by the state.

Moreover, these schools have turned their attention to raising achievement levels on the rigorous end of course (EOC) tests for algebra and biology, in some cases with remarkable success. For example, one of our study districts has had passing rates on the algebra EOC test for African-American and Hispanic children that were literally double the state passing rates for these same groups. They have also begun to focus on increasing the percentage and diversity of students who take Advanced Placement (AP) courses and pass the AP exams or other higher-end academic measures. In addition, they have improved teacher capacity by targeting professional development to the needs of specific groups of children. Many of these districts aligned their curricula with state and national standards. They increased the involvement of parents and other community members. They moved their teachers away from the isolation of self-contained classrooms and into collaborative teaming and learning communities. In fact, all of us would agree that some of these schools are truly stunning.

Again, though, we are not saying that this success has happened everywhere. It has not. We are not saying that the data that Linda McNeil and others draw on are not accurate. The data are clearly legitimate. We are also not saying we should ignore the critics of accountability. Ignoring the critics of any educational

practice—like ignoring the advocates—is disastrous. We always need many voices and many views to help us understand the dynamic complexity of schools and schooling. What we are saying, though, is that there is powerful evidence that in some schools and districts—including many in which we have done research—these accountability systems are driving significant improvements in academic achievement for children of color and low-income children, and thus these systems are increasing equity. As a Hispanic female central office administrator told us,

I believe that TAAS has helped. I believe the state accountability system is a help. It can be an obstacle to the teaching if we concentrate on teaching only to the test, but we want success for the children, and we see success from a score. Children have to be respected. We have to respect each and every one of our children; children have no limitations.

Given our considerable history of widespread failure with teaching “other people’s children,” this change is historic.

Whatever problems there are with the tests used (and there are many), whatever other problems there are with the accountability systems (and there are many), these three extremely important, historic effects are being driven by accountability systems. Additionally, even if some will argue with us about our depiction of these effects (and we invite dialogue on all these issues), these possibilities should cause us to stop and think carefully about these systems and their impact on equity. We suggest that many of us who care deeply about equity have had to be so skeptical and critical for so long that we may have forgotten to think carefully about positive possibilities. We suggest that everyone stop and consider whether it just might be possible that this is the moment to install a new national equity norm.

It just might be possible that we could have a new national expectation, publicly supported by both major parties, for a high-profile mandate—a democratic mandate, an equity mandate—for equal academic success for children of color and for low-income children. In other words, instead of just saying we are dedicated to being successful with all students, we would actually decide to do it. As Edmonds (1979) said many years ago, “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that” (p. 23). If we successfully taught all children, as Edmonds suggested, would the struggle for racial equity in our education system be over? No, it would not. However, our question is, “Can we use the possibilities of this historic moment to significantly increase educational equity?” We think the answer to this question is yes.

## **Fifty Different, Complex, Dynamic Systems**

If we are going to install a new national norm and if we are going to accomplish this through state accountability systems, we need to think in a new way about these systems. We all need to understand that, contrary to most of the discussions to date, these systems are not simply tests; they are each different, and they are highly complex and dynamic systems.

Each state's accountability system is a complicated arrangement of multiple and interacting components, including the tests used, the grades and subjects tested, the types of public reporting done, the levels of performance mandated, the types of assistance given to low-performing schools and districts, and so on. After studying the Texas system for several years, we believe that the equity effects of this system are deeply dependent on a wide range of components and not just the tests. Particularly relevant have been preschool education, cuts in class size, more equitable funding statewide, and a careful setting of the initial pass rates so the state could afford to provide real service to all low-performing districts. Consequently, to depict different accountability systems as similar or to depict any one of them by describing just one component, such as testing, or even just a few components is a major distortion.

Some systems use norm-referenced tests, and some use criterion-referenced tests. Some use only paper-and-pencil tests, some use performance tests, and some use both. Some disaggregate data by racial and income groups, while others do not. Some states test in many grades across many subjects, and some test in only a few subjects across a few grades. Some have rewards and punishments attached to results; some have only one or the other; some have neither. Some provide state assistance for all low-performing schools and districts; some do not. So all these systems have many components, and these components interact to produce specific effects.

Finally, these components are changing over time; that is, these systems are dynamic. For example, the Kentucky accountability system, another system that has received considerable positive attention, has been in operation for at least 10 years. Over that time, different components of the system, including the tests themselves, have changed as a result of performance effects; feedback from educators, policy makers, and the public; and negotiations among stakeholders (Lindle, 1999). Consequently, it is clear that these systems are changing year by year in complex ways.

Thus it is as if there are 50 somewhat different games going on at one time. The components of each game differ from those of the other games, and the extent to which each game employs a particular component also differs. And, of course, the components change over time, with new ones being added, others being changed, and still others disappearing. For example, California's system has changed so often that one might reasonably assert that any understanding of its goals and effects is impossible (Sandham, 2000). Thus to research and understand these complex and dynamic systems in any accurate and

comprehensive way, especially in terms of their effects on equity, requires careful and thoughtful study.

We know of one research project that has tried to address some of this complexity as it relates to equity effects. This project, using the HLM (Hierarchical Linear Modeling) statistical technique, incorporated only a fairly limited set of system components and none of the changes over time, though it did cover all 50 states (see Muller & Schiller, 2000). What did these researchers find? Mixed and contradictory equity effects. For example, they found that extensive state testing (many tests at many grades over many subjects) actually increased the number of advanced mathematics credits earned by low-income children and increased their high school graduation rates. On the other hand, state systems that linked test performance to consequences for schools increased socioeconomic stratification, though the achievement of all student groups improved. Thus in this research on statewide systems (not on individuals, schools, or districts), some system components increased equity, some decreased equity, and some had different equity effects under different conditions for different groups of students.

Given the dynamic complexity of these systems, given the almost inevitably mixed equity effects, and given that schools and districts implement accountability systems in different ways, it is critically important that we attend to the whole range of data across different implementations of the accountability systems. Then we need to reflect on what facilitates more equity and what does not. For example, if it is true that, in a particular accountability system at a particular time, some schools and districts are increasing inequity and others are increasing equity, we need to try to learn what those schools and districts that are increasing equity are actually doing. And we need to ask what we can do to help many more schools and districts make the same kind of efforts.

### **Thinking Carefully about Equity and Accountability**

To facilitate this understanding, we suggest a five-category outline to organize the study of these systems and their equity effects. The five categories are (1) system components, (2) curriculum issues, (3) teaching issues, (4) assessment issues, and (5) other issues. Considerable research already exists in each of these areas, though the results across the various data sets have often been complex and contradictory in their relationships to equity. This is not the appropriate place to offer a detailed discussion of this vast body of research. Instead, we will provide here just a brief description of each area and an indication of some of the issues that are likely to arise in each.

## 1.

*System Components*

We need to know—and to integrate into our research and commentary—what the several specific components of each state’s system are. To do this, we need a taxonomy of system components that is comprehensive across all components of all state systems. We also need to track when each component was instituted; when it changed, if it did; and when it was eliminated, if it was. Consequently, what we need is a comprehensive taxonomy that is time-coded or includes a time line for each component and its changes. This will ensure that research and commentary on the equity effects of these systems always attend to their dynamic complexity.

## 2.

*Curriculum Issues*

We need to focus carefully on the effects any particular system has on the curriculum that is actually being delivered in classrooms, not just on the stated curriculum. We also need to focus carefully on the range of system components that are related to curriculum changes, without assuming that any relationships we find are cause-and-effect ones. We need to attend to whether different schools and districts are using different curricula with different groups of children. Specifically, we need to study curricula that are being used with low-income students and with students of color. Furthermore, we need to look carefully at the relationship of the state’s tests to the state’s academic standards, especially as these relate to equity.

As we examine each of these issues, we need to realize that it is highly likely that there will be contradictory evidence on equity effects. In fact, we already know that these contradictions exist on curriculum issues. Linda McNeil has found a dumbing down and narrowing of curricula for low-income children, while we and others have found substantially improved curricula in some schools and districts. Yet whatever contradictions in data and results we may find, it is important for us to consider recent history. Before standards and accountability systems, the curriculum actually provided to low-income students of all races, as Jeannie Oakes (1985) has shown, was typically a “low-track” one, meaning basic and narrow. Indeed, one Hispanic male principal summed up his school’s experience for us:

Before state accountability came in, it was sort of a hit and miss situation. It didn’t really matter whether students were scoring high or scoring low. Nowadays that is not the case. I’ve heard all the arguments that all we’re doing is teaching to the test, but it’s not that. We have time lines we follow, but this is not the only thing we teach. We still follow our regular curriculum and do the regular things we do throughout the day. We have a



media class that we offer for editing, TV production, radio production. We participate in Academic Decathlon. In fact, for a couple of years we had the regional champions. So our kids do a lot of different things; it's not just TAAS.

Consequently, we need to remember that, whatever curriculum changes have been caused by different accountability systems and their changing components, for a long time the curriculum for low-income children has typically been dismal.

### 3.

#### *Teaching Issues*

How do the components of the accountability system correlate with teaching or changes in teaching, especially as these relate to low-income children? Are particular sets of interactive system components causing lower- or higher-quality teaching for low-income children? Within any specific state system, we need to find out whether some districts are improving their teaching for low-income children, and we need to find out how they are doing so.

Three critical issues have already been raised in this area. One is that the high-stakes use of the tests is de-skilling teachers and thus destroying good teaching. A second is that high-stakes accountability systems are driving teachers out of teaching. A third is that time and funds that were once used for professional development are now being consumed by the purchase of test preparation materials and the narrow training of teachers in how to teach children just to pass the tests. Not surprisingly, in these three critical areas, there already exists contradictory research.

For example, in contrast to what Linda McNeil found and reported in her June, 2000, *Kappan* article, we have studied schools and districts in which teachers have become reflective practitioners who continually use data to improve the quality of their instruction. We have studied schools populated primarily by low-income students where teacher turnover has diminished substantially, where teacher absentee rates are low, and where there are other indications—including our interview and observation data—that teachers are experiencing a high level of professional satisfaction. In many of these schools, professional development is no longer simply an event; it is part of the culture of the school as teachers come together regularly to solve problems, share ideas, and support one another in improving instruction.

But as we seek to understand contradictory data on equity, it is important to remember the nature of prior practices. A great deal of the research, such as that of Linda Darling-Hammond and Deborah Ball (1998) and Ronald Ferguson (1998), has indicated that the general level of teaching quality that existed prior to the institution of these accountability systems was consistently low for the overwhelming percentage of children of color and low-income children. This is

not to say that there were not many strong teachers serving low-income children, but the research has overwhelmingly indicated that these children have typically not received the best teaching. (The reasons offered for this lower quality are many, including less experienced teachers, conscious or unconscious racial and cultural bias, more teachers assigned outside their areas of teaching expertise, low-quality professional development, and so on.) Furthermore, we must also remember that educators throughout the education system have historically had “deficit” or “subtractive” expectations for low-income children and children of color. As Martin Carnoy said recently, some of the critics of accountability efforts seem to imply that there already exists or once existed “some wonderful alternative out there” for low-income children, “but what was happening [prior to the accountability systems] for those children was probably even worse” (quoted in Viadero, 2000a, p. 6).

#### 4.

#### *Assessment Issues*

The major issue in this area is the question of the validity of the specific tests used to measure learning, especially the learning of low-income children. Some scholars of testing and measurement question how we can even discuss test validity when we do not have a consensus on what learning is (see, for example, Linn, 2000). In addition, some have raised the issue of the seemingly low correlation between state tests and state standards (Keating, 2000). Certainly, if standards are supposed to be the center of a state’s curriculum, the lack of a strong correlation between a state’s tests and its standards is a serious problem.

In addition, some, including Stafford Hood (1998) and Laurence Parker (2000), have suggested that the current range of state tests is culturally biased in favor of middle-class White culture and against African-American or Mexican-American cultures.<sup>4</sup> Are there specific test questions that children of one culture would tend to know, but those of others would not? Does one method of testing favor some cultures and hurt others? Does state testing play a central role in cultural dominance? Clearly, many schools, districts, and states pay insufficient attention to the fact that the United States is composed of different cultures. On the other hand, in our research we have found some schools and districts that are highly attuned to the culture or cultures of their students and that use this knowledge in positive ways for the academic benefit of the children.

Although we strongly support the critical importance of culturally relevant teaching, multicultural curricula, and culturally responsive assessment, we think it is also critically important to hear a perspective that we have consistently heard from many principals of color who lead schools in which the students—predominantly children of color—are exhibiting high academic performance (Scheurich, 1998). What these principals have told us is that they agree that there are cultural and racial biases in the tests. However, they also say that, before the advent of accountability systems, the rules of public schooling were a moving

target. As a result, no matter what they accomplished in their schools and no matter how high their performance, it did not count or was not deemed legitimate because of the race and class of the students and because of the race of the principals. Now that the rules of academic success are public and stable—even if biased and even if imposed by the dominant culture—these principals argue that the tests allow them to prove that their schools can compete academically with the best schools in the state. A female African-American principal told us that another administrator had approached her to ask, “How do you get those kind of [TAAS] scores from your caliber of children?” Her response was, “Excuse me. We have high expectations for all children. I will put my children toe-to-toe with your children on any given day.” Because everyone was using the same accountability system, she could prove that her students could be just as successful as any other students. Certainly these principals of color would strongly prefer more culturally and racially responsive tests, and they would clearly support efforts to accomplish this end, as would we. But in the meantime, they argue from the field that schooling under accountability systems is definitely preferable to schooling without them.

## 5.

### *Other Issues*

Under this heading would come a number of specific questions that just don't fit in the first four categories. How does the achievement of middleclass White children compare to that of low-income children and children of color? Is a particular state system increasing equity or inequity? Are some components of some systems increasing drop-out or push-out rates for children of color, as Haney (2000) has claimed?

In addition, one important matter that we have recently been focusing on is how these results-driven accountability systems change the ways schools work and are organized. In other words, before accountability systems, schools and districts were primarily focused on “input” characteristics, such as teacher accreditation, teacher:student ratio, and so on. Now, under some accountability systems, schools and districts have become focused primarily on “output” or student achievement. As Brian Rowan and Cecil Miskel (1999) have suggested, this has enormous implications for how schools work.

In this area, too, there are contradictory results. For example, Haney (2000) has argued that the Texas accountability system is increasing the drop-out rate for children of color. In contrast, an examination of the same data by Edward Fuller of the Dana Center, a research and training center at the University of Texas, Austin, suggests that there may be other, equally legitimate interpretations (see Viadero, 2000b). In addition, Martin Carnoy, Susanne Loeb, and Tiffany Smith (2000) found no consistent effects of the Texas system on drop-out rates for children of color. Whatever the findings, drawing large and

dramatic conclusions is a threat to a careful and thoughtful research based understanding of these accountability systems and their equity effects.

### Conclusion

Are state accountability systems hurting the education of children of color and low-income children? Or are they increasing equity? The accurate answer is both, depending on which system, which interacting components, and which time period are being considered. These systems are too complex and dynamic to jump to simple and generalized conclusions about them. Instead, we need to be careful and thoughtful about how we judge these systems and their equity effects.

We especially need to be careful and thoughtful because these systems, with all their evident flaws, may provide us with a historic opportunity to permanently alter the norm for success with low-income children of all races. It is exceedingly important that our failure with low-income children of all races be publicly acknowledged. Creating a high-profile public mandate for achieving true success for all children, an outcome supported by both major parties and by most business leaders, is a democratic necessity. Providing numerous examples of academic success with children of color and with low-income children in many different school environments is powerfully influential. Yes, these systems have many problems. Yes, there is evidence that they both increase and decrease equity. Yes, we need to listen to those who support these systems and those who criticize them. No, these systems will not end struggles for full racial equity in schooling. But the primary question with regard to these accountability systems must always be: In this historical moment, can we use them to truly improve educational equity?

### Notes

1. Our colleagues include Pedro Reyes, Jay Scribner, Lonnie Wagstaff, Alicia Paredes Scribner, and Uri Treisman. See also Johnson (1998); Raglan, Asera, and Johnson (1999); Reyes, Scribner, and Paredes Scribner (1999); Scheurich (1998); Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck(2000).
2. In September, 2000, we completed an in-depth study of four Texas districts that had demonstrated district-wide success with children of color and low-income children. The members of our research team were the three authors of this chapter and Jim Koschoreck, Dawn Hogan, and Pam Smith. The Sid W.Richardson Foundation has funded this study.
3. Our selection criteria for these successful districts included not only high levels of success on the state tests, but also such criteria as enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, SAT/ACT scores, drop-out rates, 9th grade retention rates, percentages assigned to special education, and test-exemption percentages, including English as a second language/bilingual exemption rates. While these

districts were not at ideal levels in all areas, they were typically better than state averages for similar districts.

4. This perspective is directly connected to the kind of culturally relevant pedagogy advocated by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) in *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*.

## References

- Carnoy, M., Loeb, S., & Smith, T.L. (2000). *Do higher state test scores in Texas make for better high school outcomes?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Ball, D.L. (1998). *Teaching for high standards: What policymakers need to know and be able to do* (CPRE No. JRE-04). Philadelphia: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.
- Delpit, L.D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in education other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review* 58(3), 280–98.
- Edmonds, R.R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership* 37 (1), 15–8, 20–24.
- Ferguson, R.F. (1998). Can schools narrow the Black-White test score gap. In C.Jencks & M.Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap* (pp. 318–75). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Grissmer, D., & Flanagan, A. (1998). *Exploring rapid achievement gains in North Carolina and Texas*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel.
- Haney, W. (2000, April). *The myth of the "Texas miracle" in educational reform*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Hood, S. (1998) Culturally responsive performance-based assessment: Conceptual and psychometric considerations. *Journal of Negro Education* 67(3), 187–96.
- Johnson, J.F. (1998). *The promise of school reform in Texas*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from the Charles A.Dana Center Web site: <<http://www.starcenter.org/products/articles/prac.html>>
- Keating, P. (2000). *Understanding standards*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lindle, J.C. (1999, April). *"Hasn't anyone else done this right?": A field note on the political realities and perceptions in modify ing Kentucky's high-stakes accountability system*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Linn, R.L. (2000). Assessments and accountability. *Educational Researcher* 29(2), 4–16.
- McNeil, L. (2000). Creating new inequalities: Contradictions of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan* 81(10), 728–34.
- Muller, C., & Schiller, K.S. (2000, April). *Leveling the playing field? Students' educational attainment and states' performance testing*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Orfield, G., & Wald, J. (2000, June 5). Testing, testing [Electronic version]. *The Nation*.
- Parker, L. (2000). *Comments for "Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice?"* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Ragland, M.A., Asera, R., & Johnson, J.F. (1999). *Urgency, responsibility, efficacy: Preliminary findings of a study of high-performing Texas school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center.
- Reyes, P., Scribner, J.D., & Paredes Scribner, A. (1999). *Lessons from high performing Hispanic schools: Creating learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rowan, B., & Miskel, C.G. (1999). Institutional theory and the study of educational organizations. In J. Murphy & K.S. Louis (Eds.). *Handbook of research on educational administration* (2nd ed., pp. 359–83). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sandham, J.L. (2000, June 7). Calif, education initiatives criticized as lacking cohesion. *Education Week*, 19.
- Scheurich, J.J. (1998). Highly successful and loving, public elementary schools populated mainly by low-SES children of color: Core beliefs and cultural characteristics. *Urban Education* 33(4), 451–91.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., Johnson, J.F., & Koschoreck, J.W. (2000, April). *Accountability for equity: Can state policy leverage social justice?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Viadero, D. (2000a, May 3). High-stakes tests lead debate at researchers' gathering. *Education Week* 19(34), 6.
- . (2000b, May 31). Testing system in Texas yet to get a final grade. *Education Week* 19(38), 1, 20–21.



# CHAPTER 3

## Let's Treat the Cause, Not the Symptoms

### *Equity and Accountability in Texas Revisited*

**RICHARD R.VALENCIA, ANGELA VALENZUELA, KRIS SLOAN, AND DOUGLAS E.FOLEY**

The December 2000 *Kappan* featured a very important contribution to the current discourse on standards-based school reform. “Thinking Carefully about Equity and Accountability” by James Scheurich, Linda Skrla, and Joseph Johnson [chapter 2 of this volume], invited readers to take part in a dialogue on these issues.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of our disagreement with Scheurich and his colleagues is the subject of the standards-based school reform movement, which has come to dominate most discussions in education today and which has spawned a great deal of scholarly literature, conferences, symposia, and even litigation.

We wish to focus here on several misconceptions, omissions, and flaws in the argument put forth by Scheurich and his colleagues. We have organized our response around the following points: the common ground we share, the flaws in their “historic possibilities” thesis, their misconception of accountability as a dichotomy, and our vision of equity and accountability.

#### **Common Ground**

Although we differ with Scheurich and his colleagues on a number of points, there are several on which we agree—at least in part. We believe it is important to outline this common ground at the outset so that we can pursue further dialogue on these issues.

#### *Historical Grounding*

Scheurich and his co-authors assert that “we have posted a miserable academic record with the great majority of low-income children and children of color specifically” (p. 294). We strongly agree. The literature on the historical and current lack of equal educational opportunity experienced by students of color is vast. Indeed, the failure to acknowledge this reality is the major reason why standards-based school reform—in which testing plays a prominent role—works against students of color. Although Scheurich and his colleagues are aware of the dismal record of our society in promoting school success for low-income students and students of color, they do not seem to truly appreciate the need to take into account the persistent, pervasive, and oppressive nature of such school



failure in addressing the reform of our nation's public schools (Valencia, 2000a). For example, such inattention by the state of Texas and its expert witnesses to past discrimination was clearly seen in the *GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al.* court case. The state strongly underscored its need for a high-stakes test as a standard for graduation, yet was ahistorical regarding the plight of students of color. The logic of having an exit examination linked to high-school graduation makes sense in a perfect world in which equal educational opportunity exists. Of course, this is not the case.

Thus standards-based school reform misses the mark. It is structurally misdirected because it treats the symptoms of school failure (e.g., poor achievement), rather than the cause (i.e., inferior schools). We agree with Arthur Pearl (2002) who notes that "school failure [and success] can be fully understood only when analyzed in the broadest political, economic, and cultural contexts. Macropolicies establish the boundaries of possibilities."

### *Deficit Thinking*

Citing the works of Lisa Delpit (1988), Richard Valencia (1997), and Angela Valenzuela (1999), Scheurich and his co-authors discuss the significant fact that many educators view the educability of low-income students of color as limited and see them as the makers of their own academic problems. This is "deficit thinking," and it contrasts sharply with the view that students of color, especially those from low-income backgrounds, must be viewed as having unlimited potential. Furthermore, the latter view holds that we must have high, reasonable standards for success and provide equal encouragement via democratic education (Pearl & Knight, 1999).

Scheurich and his associates are aware of the nature of deficit thinking and of its negative effects on students of color (see Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Yet the accountability model they espouse—standards-based school reform—reinforces deficit thinking by placing the onus of academic improvement largely on the individual and the family. A more reasonable explanation of school failure would recognize the need to examine how schools have been organized to exclude students of color from learning, especially through a denial of equal educational opportunities (Valencia & Bernal, 2000).

### *National Equity Norm*

Scheurich and his colleagues call for a "new national equity norm." We, too, are very interested in pursuing a national agenda for equal educational opportunity. However, the question that remains concerns the path that will lead to equity for all groups. We do not see standards-based school reform as a viable vehicle for the creation of a national equity norm. Our vision of a national program that will lead to equal educational opportunity rests on the principles of democratic education, additive schooling, demystification of current educational equity, and

anti-deficit thinking (see McNeil, 2000; Pearl, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Valencia, 1997). In addition, Nancy Kober's (2001) incisive report, *It Takes More Than Testing*, offers excellent suggestions on how to reduce the White/minority achievement gap.

### *Flaws in the "Historical Possibilities" Thesis*

To us, the core of the chapter by Scheurich and his colleagues is the section headed "Three Historic Possibilities." Here, the authors develop their thesis: three "historical moments" of great significance are taking place simultaneously, and we should seize them in order to promote educational equity. Moreover, they argue, accountability systems are driving all three. We offer a critique of each of these.

#### 1.

#### *Level of Public Attention*

Scheurich and his associates ask, "In what prior historical moment has there been such a high level of public attention paid to the public schools' lack of success with low-income children and children of color?" Indeed, the plight of students of color is receiving considerable attention from both schools and the general public. However, Scheurich and his colleagues ignore the fact that these students have been subjects of interest for decades, even as the denial of educational equality and subsequent school failure for many of these students have persisted. Over the years, numerous White scholars and scholars of color have written about the plight and struggle of students of color. Yet the implications of their research for the improvement of schooling for minority students have often been disregarded by policy makers and the courts. Given our nation's poor track record in addressing and realizing equal educational opportunities for all students, we fail to see how the "high level of public attention" in the current moment will spur a movement leading to equitable school reform.

#### 2.

#### *Major Public Commitment*

Scheurich and his colleagues ask, "In what historical moment has there ever been a major public commitment to high academic performance for all races and socioeconomic classes of students by both major U.S. political parties and their candidates for president?" One would be hard-pressed to find an instance in the recent history of U.S. politics when either major political party—or either major candidate for president—did not support efforts to promote high academic performance for all students. Campaign rhetoric, however, should not be misconstrued as commitment to the issue.

We feel that the message conveyed through this question blurs substantive differences—in both the political and academic arenas—over how to reach the goal of high academic performance for all students. Rather than place our faith in test-centric systems of accountability to “leverage” more equitable, higher-quality education for all students, as do Scheurich and his colleagues, we believe that there are proven means that are less top-down in nature and do not lead to reductionist models of teaching and learning. For example, issues of class size, school size, and teacher quality have been shown to correlate with higher academic achievement, especially among low-income students of color. But the major political parties have demonstrated far less commitment to these issues. As a result, alternative, more pedagogically substantive means for achieving high academic performance for all children have been excluded from the most recent education debates, which have been dominated by flexibility in school funding (i.e., vouchers) and by accountability through increased testing requirements.

### 3.

#### *Improved Academic Success*

Scheurich and his associates assert, “The third historic consequence of these accountability systems is the substantially improved academic success of children of color and low-income students and the substantially improved equity in some schools and districts in some states” (p. 295). To support this assertion, they draw heavily on their work with just 30 school districts in Texas—a minuscule percentage (2.9%) of Texas’s 1,041 school districts. These districts, Scheurich and his colleagues claim, have been experiencing considerable success in academic achievement (as evidenced, for example, by pass rates on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills). Their work is more fully described in other publications (see Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). In underscoring their thesis that equity-driven achievement-focused school districts can be identified and nurtured, Scheurich and his associates showcase “the best of the best” by focusing on four school districts—Aldine, Brazosport, San Benito, and Wichita Falls (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). There is no doubt that TAAS pass rates for students have improved in these four districts. Scheurich and his colleagues assert that these gains are largely attributable to use of the “Effective Schools” process, initiated by the late Ronald Edmonds, in which strong administrative leadership and high expectations for students play key roles in promoting high academic achievement.

#### **Additional Concerns**

Undoubtedly, the administrators and teachers in the four “best of the best” districts have been hard at work trying to raise the academic performance of all students. Notwithstanding their efforts and results, we have a number of concerns.

## 1.

*Methodology*

Arthur Pearl (1991), in a methodological critique of the Effective Schools Movement, noted: “At the present time we do not know whether the gains cited for the Effective School are treatment effects—caused by the intervention—or selection effects of two kinds: nonrepresentative leadership and a nonrandom selection of minority students” (p. 295). We ask, might Pearl’s methodological concern about Effective Schools also be germane here to the “best of the best”?

## 2.

*Success for All Students*

In reference to their four poster districts, the authors assert in another publication that these districts have been able “to produce equitable educational success for literally all the children in their districts” (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000, p. 39). As a case in point, let us examine the Aldine district. TAAS pass rates (for all tests taken) have significantly increased for all students from 1994 to 1999 (p. 42). Yet, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education on the nation’s 100 largest districts, in 1997–98 Aldine had one of the lowest graduation rates in Texas (54%) and in the nation. Aldine’s graduation rate ranked 77th among the nation’s 100 largest Districts (Haney, 2001, p. 50).

Let us also examine the San Benito district. Considerable within-district variability on TAAS pass rates (for all tests taken) is evident (Texas Education Agency, 2000). In Down Elementary School (91.1% Hispanic), the TAAS pass rate in the 1999–2000 school year was 93.8% for Hispanic students. In sharp contrast, in La Paloma Elementary School (99.8% Hispanic), the TAAS pass rate for Hispanic students was only 66.7%—a difference of 27.1 percentage points.

In sum, the existence of a global effect—equitable educational success for all children—cannot be supported. The assertions of these researchers are both misleading and inaccurate, and they also perpetuate “the myth of the Texas miracle” (see Haney, 2000).

Scheurich and his colleagues also claim that National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores verify significant gains in Texas (p. 294). Indeed, NAEP scores have risen in Texas. The important question, however, is: Have the achievement gaps between White and minority students been significantly reduced? Paul Barton (2001) recently investigated this issue and found that 47 states (including Texas) failed to significantly reduce the gap in average NAEP scores between students in the top 25% of the distribution and students in the bottom 25% of the distribution of White and minority students (including Black and Hispanic students) in 4th grade math and reading and in 8th-grade math.<sup>2</sup>

TAAS has also been touted as having reduced the drop-out rate in Texas. But Natasha Rubanova and Tom Mortenson (2001) examined the “cohort survival

rate” of the 50 states (the rate is defined as the ratio of the number of 9th graders enrolled in the fall to the number of regular high school graduates some four years later). In 1998–99 Texas—with a cohort survival rate of 60.6%—ranked 38th in the nation, well below the national median of 71.8%. Texas has consistently ranked below the national median in its cohort survival rates since 1991, the year TAAS was implemented. Scheurich and his colleagues need to be very cautious in drawing the conclusion that the impact of TAAS on national achievement data has been favorable.

### 3.

#### *Typical Academic Outcomes for Minorities*

Scheurich and his colleagues make the point in their chapter that, in the Texas schools they have studied, academic progress has indeed been made. They do note that the success has not happened everywhere (p. 296). In our view, they need to vigorously remind their readers that the districts with which they are working are outliers. Their TAAS pass rates and campus ratings (“exemplary” and “recognized”) are highly atypical for schools with large numbers of students of color throughout Texas. Aldine (83% combined African American and Hispanic) and San Benito (97% Hispanic) were rated (in 1999–2000) as “recognized.” Brazosport (56% White) and Wichita Falls (63% White) were rated “exemplary” and “recognized” respectively.

Mark Fassold (2000) conducted a comprehensive statewide analysis of Texas public schools’ accountability ratings by various racial/ethnic enrollments (50%, 66%, and 90% or greater White enrollment and 50%, 66%, and 90% or greater combined minority student enrollment) and by school levels (elementary, middle, and secondary). Fassold’s findings were quite consistent across the various cells: White schools in Texas were consistently rated higher compared to minority campuses.

By focusing exclusively on outlier schools, researchers risk creating an illusion of widespread success and a false sense of security that school reform is in progress. Such a narrow focus, we assert, is hardly a basis for responsible education policy. If anything, it distracts from consideration of the entrenched and systemic problems faced by hundreds and hundreds of schools in Texas.

#### **Accountability as a Dichotomy**

Scheurich and his associates begin their chapter by asserting that current discourse on state accountability systems has “devolved into a strict dichotomy in which accountability is either ‘all good’ or ‘all bad.’ ” This is an inaccurate reading of the terrain and further polarizes an already contentious arena of academic discourse. We believe that accountability systems are very important; thus the need for such systems is not the issue. It is the type of system that becomes the point of contention.

The Texas accountability system—with TAAS as its centerpiece—is a case in point. In our view, Texas's system is inherently flawed. It is a topdown, remote-control system that works against parents, children, and teachers. The system favors policy makers, the Texas Education Agency, and school administrators. Most important, the driver of Texas's accountability system, TAAS, is high-stakes testing at its worst. African-American and Mexican-American students, in particular, are being adversely affected, as shown by increased drop-out and retention rates, less challenging curricula, and pernicious labeling effects that have their source in “public report cards” of school ratings (see Haney, 2000; Valencia, 2000b; Valencia & Bernal, 2000).

In sum, the characterization of the discourses on accountability systems as bipolar—“all good” or “all bad”—is simply inaccurate. Moreover, the reference by Scheurich and his colleagues to “the critics of accountability” is not useful. Thinking of this kind closes, rather than opens, discourse. We argue that accountability is vital to public education. However, it must be implemented with care. We need to shape our accountability systems in accordance with principles such as (1) parents' involvement in their children's schoolwork, (2) the allowance for teachers not to be fettered to rote, unchallenging, and measurement-driven instruction, (3) comprehensive diagnostic testing, and (4) multiple indicators of academic performance.

### **Our Vision of Equity and Accountability**

We believe that the Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE) provides an excellent point of departure for reconceptualizing accountability because of its two founding principles (see <http://www.fairtest.org/arn/masspage.html>). First, local schools know students best. Second, the state should not be making decisions about individual students. Instead, the role of the state is to ensure all students' access to high quality teaching to guarantee their success. In the spirit of democracy and local innovation, schools and districts assume primary responsibility over both assessment and its relation to retention, promotion, and graduation decisions. A central tenet is the accountability of schools and districts to the communities they serve. This can be accomplished through annual reports based on fully articulated school reform plans approved beforehand by each school district.

A distinctive feature of the CARE accountability proposal is a call for quality review boards at state and regional levels. In this framework, standardized examinations primarily test for numeracy and literacy and are used in combination with other criteria in promotion decisions.

In the area of curriculum, the state's role is to define an essential, but limited, body of knowledge and skills that is based on a predetermined set of broadly defined competencies. In the area of assessment, quality review boards at state and regional levels assume primary responsibility in assessing and reporting on the quality and availability of resources, opportunities, instruction, and

curriculum in public schools. At the state level, the quality review board's primary responsibility is to disseminate and promote the best instructional, curriculum, and assessment practices, as well as to report annually to districts and communities on disparities in resources and opportunity. Promoting equity by helping schools and districts better address their diverse needs and populations constitutes the state's core mission in this design.

At the regional level, quality review boards—made up of teachers, administrators, parents, state education agency staff members, as well as representatives of higher education and business—would develop a localized accountability system around a democratically derived set of indicators that extend beyond standardized test scores. These could include portfolios of reform efforts, including external reviews or evaluations, provided by the schools within their jurisdiction. Authentic assessments of student work (e.g., student exhibitions, portfolios, products, and performance tasks) could also be used.

Bringing the model full circle, districts and regions could also evaluate the state's education agency in terms of its responsiveness to their needs and the quality of its support in helping communities meet their equity goals. Such a bi-directional, participatory, and democratic model challenges the current top-down, results-driven, single-indicator system in ways that substantively address minorities' historic quest for equity and excellence.

### **Conclusion**

In the conclusion to their chapter, Scheurich and his associates assert that current state accountability systems are both harming the education of students of color and increasing equity for them. By contrast, we contend that state accountability systems (e.g., the one in Texas) are causing much more harm than good. We believe that the division between Scheurich and his colleagues and us lies in our differing conceptions of the more appropriate model. Scheurich and his associates emphasize the need to have a shift from an "inputs-driven" to a "results-driven" model of accountability. This explains their heavy emphasis on raising test scores. We, on the other hand, assert that what is needed is an accountability model that has a tripartite structure: (1) input (the adequacy of resources), (2) process (the quality of instruction), and (3) output (what students have learned as measured by tests or other indicators) (Cárdenas, 2000; "School-Student Performance," 1998; Valencia & Bernal, 2000). As José Cárdenas has noted:

Since neither input, process, nor output has proved to be adequate in evaluating student-teacher performance, where should the focus be placed? The obvious answer is the distribution of evaluation among all three. None of the three can be utilized without consideration of the other two. Past and present failures in evaluation cannot be attributed to the use of any of the three phases. The failure can be attributed to the focus on one of the three phases to the exclusion of the other two. (p. 10)

In conclusion, Scheurich and his colleagues are advocating an untenable model of accountability, with its attendant implications for reform, in which symptoms of school failure need to be “fixed.” We argue that treating symptoms is misdirected and unproductive. We believe with Arthur Pearl (2002) that “testing does not alter life chances any more than measuring temperature reduces fever. In the haste to do something there has been no serious effort to distinguish standards from obstacles.” We, along with Scheurich and his colleagues, want all children and youths to succeed in school. We differ considerably, however, on the means we would employ to achieve this goal.

### Notes

1. See Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson (2000). Subsequent references to this article will be made parenthetically in the text.
2. Barton examined the years 1990 through 1998.

### References

- Barton, P.E. (2001). *Raising achievement and reducing gaps: Reporting progress toward goals for academic achievement: A report to the national education goals panel*. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel.
- Cárdenas, J. (1998, October). School-student performance and accountability. *IDRA Newsletter* (25), 1–2, 17–19.
- . (2000). *Expert report*. Submitted to plaintiffs’ counsel, Albert H. Kauffman, GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al., 87 F.Supp. 2d 667 (W.D. Tex. 2000).
- Delpit, L.D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in education other people’s children. *Harvard Educational Review* 58(3), 280–98.
- Fassold, M.A.J. (2000). Disparate impact analyses of TAAS scores and school quality. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 22, 460–80.
- GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al., 87 F.Supp. 2d 667 (W.D. Tex. 2000).
- Haney, W.M. (2000). The myth of the Texas miracle in Education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8(41). Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/v8n41/>
- . (2001). *Revisiting the myth of the Texas miracle in education: Lessons about drop-out research and drop-out prevention*. Paper presented at the Drop-out Research: Accurate Counts and Positive Interventions Conference, Harvard Civil Rights Project, Cambridge, MA.
- Kober, N. (2001). *It takes more than testing: Closing the achievement gap*. Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy.
- McNeil, L.M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- Pearl, A. (1991). Systemic and institutional factors in Chicano school failure and success. In R.R. Valencia (Ed.). *Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s*. London: Falmer.



- . (2002). Systemic and institutional factors in Chicano school failure and success. In R.R.Valencia (Ed.). *Chicano school failure and success: Past, present, and future* (2nd ed.). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Pearl, A., & Knight, T. (1999). *The democratic classroom: Theory to inform practice*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Rubanova, N., & Mortenson, T. (2001). Public high-school graduate rates by state: 1981 to 1999. Retrieved from *Postsecondary Education Opportunity* Web site: <http://www.postsecondary.org/>
- Scheurich, J.J., Skrla, L., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). Thinking carefully about equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 82(4), 293–99.
- Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J.J. (2001). Displacing deficit thinking in school district leadership. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 239–55.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement-focused school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A.Dana Center.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (2000). *Academic excellence indicator system, 1999–2000*. Austin, TX: Author.
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.
- . (2000a). Inequalities and the schooling of minority students in Texas: Historical and contemporary conditions. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 22, 445–59.
- . (2000b) *Legislated school reform via high-stakes testing: The case of pending anti-social promotion legislation in Texas and its likely adverse impact on racial/ethnic minority students*. Paper commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Educational Excellence and Testing Equity, presented at the workshop on School Completion in Standards-Based Reform: Facts and Strategies, Washington, D.C.
- Valencia, R.R., & Bernal, E.M. (2000). An overview of conflicting opinions in the TAAS case. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 22, 423–44.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

# CHAPTER 4

## Continuing the Conversation on Equity and Accountability

*Listening Appreciatively, Responding Responsibly*

**JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH AND LINDA SKRLA**

In education, both equity and accountability are unquestionably controversial. While many educators resent mention of inequity and racism and avoid these issues if possible, others are angry about the widespread and persistent racial inequities they see. Meanwhile, accountability has become a highly contentious battleground, with most voices either strongly for or strongly against it. Such polarization makes having a thoughtful, productive dialogue about both equity and accountability—a dialogue that actually yields a better understanding—very difficult today.

We are pleased, however, that the response of Richard Valencia, Angela Valenzuela, Kris Sloan, and Douglas Foley (see [chapter 3](#)) to our article in the December 2000 *Kappan* (see [chapter 2](#)) is an example of the kind of thoughtful and respectful dialogue that improves understanding (see Scheurich, Skrla & Johnson, 2000).<sup>1</sup> One of our main points in that chapter was that the dialogue in education regarding equity and accountability has not been particularly fruitful and has, instead, resulted in hard, oppositional stances. But who owns truth or does research so complete that nothing is to be learned from listening to other voices, from considering other views, from contemplating different understandings? While we strongly believe that a diversity of voices and views, of choices and conclusions, is in itself productive, we must ask how we will decide which are the best policies, which are the policies most helpful to children, and which are the policies that increase equity.

Though there is not space here to discuss these questions fully, we wish to make clear that we do not believe that a “winner take all” approach—my side is correct, yours is wrong, so I win—is useful. Such an approach cites only research that supports one view, even though good research that reaches different conclusions also exists. We have repeatedly observed such interactions in the equity-and-accountability conversation. The pursuit of truth requires us to try thoughtfully to understand why the results offered by other researchers yield opposing conclusions.

A second problem we have encountered in the equity-and-accountability conversation is the use of fragments of data, chosen from a vast array, in order to prove a point. We call this the “gotcha” method of argument. For example, we have studied large, complex school districts that are working very hard to

improve the school success of children of color and that are experiencing improvements across a broad range of measures.<sup>2</sup> However, not every classroom or every school in these districts is experiencing high levels of success across all variables. In addition, none of the districts we studied have shown strong success in all possible areas. Nonetheless, the districts we studied have shown that they have made a strong commitment to improving academic success for all groups of children and have demonstrated major increases in both equity and excellence.

However, are these schools and districts perfect? Certainly not, and the educators in these districts would readily concur with this judgment. Yet this research has been repeatedly criticized because someone could find a few examples of data that indicated that there were still problem areas. This gotcha approach significantly degrades the quality of the conversation. Instead of playing gotcha, we should all be celebrating what these schools and districts have achieved: real, substantive gains for children of color and children from low-income families on a broad range of measures of academic success, including such indicators as increased completion of more rigorous, college-preparatory curricula.

Given our willingness, then, to make these kinds of changes in the ways we converse, it is our hope that this positive exchange of views will help initiate a substantial change in the equity-and-accountability conversation and will help to move that conversation toward a higher ground that will benefit everyone, especially those children who have been so poorly served by our public education system.

### **Educators Have Generally Failed Children of Color**

As our critics—let us refer to them as colleagues—point out so well, it is on the issue of inequity in the education system that we share common ground. In fact, we believe—and hope our colleagues would concur—that if readers take only one message from this exchange, it should be to understand how dismal the public education system’s treatment of and success with children of color has been and continues to be.

Let’s be honest, no matter how uncomfortable it might make us. Although the nature of racial prejudice has changed, and it is rarely public and overt, extensive evidence, data, and research clearly indicate that children of color do not get an equitable chance to be successful in school. We educators can say that we are “color blind,” that we treat all children equally, and we can repeatedly blame factors external to education—parents, student attitudes, neighborhoods, home cultures, and languages, and so on—for our failure to do better with children of color. But as our colleagues point out, the evidence strongly indicates that there is systemic bias in schools against children of color.

For example, the research is very clear on the fact that children of color are over-assigned to special education and, once there, are rarely admitted to the higher-track academic courses that prepare them for college and so improve their

chances for success in life.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, leading special education experts have concluded that assignments of more than 10% to 12% of a racial group to special education have most likely been influenced by racial, cultural, language, and other biases of educators (Artiles, 1998). Similarly, boys of color—especially Latino and African-American boys—are frequently suspended and expelled at disproportionately high rates (Townsend, 2000). The common justification for this practice is that the cause lies in the attitudes and behaviors of these boys. However, we rarely consider whether the attitudes and behaviors of educators toward these boys have anything to do with the outcome.

What's more, tracking by race and income occurs even in racially diverse schools. Middle-class White students overwhelmingly populate the programs for the gifted and talented, for college tracks, and for advanced courses (Ford & Harmon, 2001). Children of color and children from low-income families are overwhelmingly tracked to courses at the lowest level. Once assigned to these courses, students rarely get out. Surely, we can see that this is a prescription for failing to achieve equity in schooling.

In contrast, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) and Luis Moll (1992) have each suggested that we use the culture of the children in educationally powerful ways. Eugene Garcia (1999) has recommended that we make positive use of the home languages of children to further their education. We ourselves, along with other researchers (see, for example, Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999) have seen many schools at all levels that are educating children of color very successfully.

When anyone takes a thoughtful look at the broad range of evidence, it is clear that we continue to systematize inequity in numerous ways. Nonetheless, we educators often steadfastly resist any honest, open examination of ourselves, our ways of thinking, our assumptions, or our methods. We immediately want to blame someone else, to blame factors external to schooling, to avoid any possibility that we may be part of the problem. We believe—and we think our colleagues would agree—that this resistance and defensiveness is our failure. Certainly, the entire cause of inequity in schooling is not our fault, but just as certainly, if anyone is going to examine education and strive to make matters better, it must be educators. If anyone in our society is to be a source of hope and change toward a more equitable future, it must be public educators. We believe in the unlimited potential of children of color, and we believe it is our duty to create the conditions in classrooms, schools, and districts to allow them to realize that potential.

### **Confirming Our Colleagues' Criticisms**

In a further effort to improve the nature of the critical discussion of equity and accountability, we now briefly address three highly important criticisms that our colleagues have raised, and we agree that they are excellent points. (They offer other excellent criticisms, as well, but space is limited.) In doing this, we want to

suggest that all participants in discussions of education policy and research ought to be much more open and willing to validate the points made by those with differing opinions. Though we all claim to be open to good criticism, in fact, we typically tend to defend our positions and resist any criticisms.

First, we think the call for attention to issues of Opportunity to Learn (OTL) ought to be central to any effort to achieve equity in schooling. Our colleagues are on target in emphasizing this point. If a school serving children of color has high teacher turnover, a high percentage of teachers teaching outside their area of expertise, lower per-pupil funding, a lack of high-level classes, exclusion of children of color from college-prep classes, and so on, who can credibly argue that all the children attending this school have an equal chance to succeed? Who can legitimately argue that children of color are not more likely to be in low-OTL classrooms, schools, and districts than White, middle-class children? Such differences seriously bias the education system against children of color and for White, middleclass children. Thus we certainly support adding an OTL score to the accountability scores for all schools and districts. Let's make OTL visible, obvious, and public, just as we do with test scores.

Our second validation of our colleagues' criticisms is that we wholeheartedly agree that there are proven means other than an emphasis on testing for improving academic outcomes, including class size, school size, and teacher quality. We have repeatedly tried very hard to convey that everyone should understand that, if there have been improvements in academic results in Texas, they are the result of a multiplicity of factors, including court-mandated funding changes, statewide class-size reductions, funding for pre-kindergarten, and so on (see Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001). The results from any state accountability system do not exist in isolation from numerous changes in state policies, typically several per year. We have tried to emphasize this interconnectedness, but everyone seems to hear only that we support accountability. Nonetheless, we want to join the chorus with our colleagues in stating that there ought to be more attention to and funding for the use of a variety of means for improving the learning of all children.

Third, our colleagues suggest that there ought to be more parent involvement in schools. We agree, and we would point out that there is excellent research that indicates that we need to get outside middle-class notions of parent involvement if we are to successfully serve students of different races, cultures, contexts, home languages, and ethnicities (see Haynes & Comer, 1996; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). We suggest that state accountability systems ought to include a method for measuring customer (i.e., student, parent, and community) satisfaction, that the results of these measures ought to be disaggregated by race and income group, and that they ought to be reported in the media just as test scores are.

In general, the largest problem in involving parents of color has been that we educators often want to think of parent involvement only in the way that works with middle-class White parents. In our research and experience, schools and

districts that are successful with students of color are highly successful in involving parents and communities. These schools have learned to fashion that relationship in ways that fit the parents and community being served by the school or district.

### **Some Other Concerns to Think About**

We also want to express three concerns about some of the issues our colleagues raised. In doing this, we are not claiming that we have the truth and that they are in error. We see all criticisms—even those that originate with us—as invitations to further dialogue, further conversation, further opportunity to learn together.

First, we believe that focusing on classrooms, schools, and districts that are increasing equity is just as important as focusing on the continuing effects of racism. There are schools and districts, administrators and teachers, and state policy makers and leaders at all levels who are truly wrestling with creating schooling that is highly successful with all children and highly equitable for all children. In our research we have tried to focus on the work of these people and the ways accountability has influenced them positively. Yes, it is true that some educators are dumbing down the curriculum, creating test factories, and pushing children of color out the door,<sup>4</sup> but others are working hard to change education so that it works for all students and all student groups.

The schools of the Texas Interfaith Alliance are one example of such effort. They do grassroots organizing that always begins with residents of low-income communities of color. They have been particularly adept at using the Texas accountability system in positive ways, including using it to show their successes and to obtain additional state funding for their efforts (Shirley, 1997). In addition, the Texas Rio Grande Valley districts, which are overwhelmingly low-income and Latino, have been one of the major regional engines of Texas school success. Numerous educational leaders who have been or are now working in that area, such as Roberto Zamora, Encarnacion Garza, and Sylvia Hatton, have used the accountability system as one of the tools for driving school improvement.

These kinds of successes, often led by leaders of color, cannot be ignored. These are people in the educational trenches who have repeatedly testified to us about their positive uses of the accountability system. We all need to recognize that there are inarguably important areas of success in which the accountability system has been and is playing a positive role.

Second, we believe we need to be careful about a kind of romanticism that attaches to the idea of moving everything down to the community level. The civil rights movement had to go to the national level to gain success because many of those in power at the community level were so racist. When the federal civil rights laws were passed, one of the arguments these racists used was that all decisions should be made at the local level. As a result, most of the civil rights gains started at the national level and were literally forced on local people. The same is true of Title IX, which has dramatically transformed the educational and

recreational experiences of girls. Both of these were top-down changes that are now viewed as positive.

Indeed, in all the districts we studied, whether the leaders were White or people of color, the Texas accountability system played a significant role in pushing district leaders, the media, community leaders, businesspeople, parents, and others to pay attention to how poorly many children—but particularly children of color and children from low-income families—were being educated. For example, in San Benito in the Texas Rio Grande Valley, where virtually all of the local leaders are Latino, the lack of academic success with low-income children from Latino families was largely ignored until the accountability system highlighted how poorly a large proportion of them were doing. In response to published accountability results in San Benito, the newspaper editor and other community members rallied to bring in new leaders, who were dedicated to building a district in which all children would succeed academically.

This same point is even more salient in White-led districts. The White leaders in many districts were ignoring the poor academic achievement of children of color and children from low-income families. Indeed, before the accountability system, many leaders did not have factual data on the extent of school failure in their districts. Sonny Donaldson, the White superintendent of the Aldine Independent School District (a 50,000-student, urban district in the Houston area, in which 71% of the children come from low-income families and 86% of the students are children of color), led the transformation of the district until his retirement this past summer. He told us, and often repeats publicly, that he literally had no idea how poorly children of color were doing in his district. It was the public data from the accountability system that pushed him and other local leaders to reexamine what they had been doing.<sup>5</sup> The result has been exceptional, though the people in Aldine know they have much further to go. But what they have accomplished as a district flatly contradicts what most scholars and educators thought was possible on a district-wide basis with so many students from low-income homes.

Thus, before accountability, a lack of success with children of color could remain largely ignored by most educators. In other words, in many places the accountability system, just like the top down civil rights laws and Title IX, has pushed schools, districts, administrators, teachers, and community leaders to attend more strongly to the educational needs of children of color. Despite all the problems of accountability systems, the increased attention to the academic needs of children of color remains a major accomplishment.

Third, we suggest that our colleagues reconsider their labeling of our research results as an “outlier effect.” Some researchers have asserted that any study of successful examples, when most are not successful, is a study of outliers and so not very useful. The suggestion that we should not try to learn from successful examples strikes us as odd. In addition, this critique has been used particularly against any schools or districts that are successful with children of color, as it was often used against Ron Edmonds’s work with schools that were unusually

effective with children of color. Indeed, many people are still very uncomfortable with the idea that it is possible to be highly successful academically with children of color on a school- or district-wide basis.

However, the technical statistical concept of outlier is taken from “bell curve” statistics. It assumes that all schools and districts are arrayed along some kind of bell curve on which a few do well or poorly, but most do neither. We would suggest that this is not an appropriate statistical model to apply to schools or districts. Instead, we recommend two counterpropositions. First, we suggest that it is possible for all schools and districts to successfully support the unlimited potential of children of color and all other children. Second, and more important, the districts we studied are not outliers on a statistical curve that encompasses all possible districts. They are examples of districts that make a strong effort to seek both equity and excellence. Schools and districts that make a genuine commitment to creating a system that works well for all children are not outliers, but they are a different breed, a new and a highly important one for U.S. education.

### **Conclusion**

We want to end by thanking our colleagues again for their strongly positive contribution to the continuing conversation on equity and accountability. We have pointed to some techniques of argument that we believe need to be eliminated. And we have tried to continue what they started by charting areas of agreement and raising new issues for discussion. We firmly believe that there ought to be a stronger commitment to this kind of reflection and less of a commitment to defending our egos.

Finally, though, we want to return to our common ground with them: the need to eradicate inequity and racism in public schooling. The local and state public education systems must be at the heart of our hope for an equitable society. If equity is not a central focus for educators, who else will make it theirs? We educators are properly on the front lines of the effort to build an equitable society. Nonetheless, many are currently saying how hard our job as educators has become or how much harder it has gotten. That may be true. But we did not choose our profession for money or fame or power. We chose to be teachers, to serve children, and to make a difference.

To make a real difference for our future together, we must choose equity as strongly as we chose to be teachers. Even if it is hard, even if we have to confront our own biases, even if we have to change how we teach and conduct schooling in order to make the dream of an equitable democracy come true, we educators must choose equity. We must choose to serve all children equally.



## Notes

1. In March 2001, Joseph Johnson joined the U.S. Department of Education as director of compensatory programs; his duties in that role prevented his participation in writing this response.
2. See Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson (2000); see also *Education and Urban Society*, vol. 33, 2001, an issue that focuses on “Accountability and Achievement in High-Poverty School Settings.”
3. See, for example, the Harvard Civil Rights Project, “Executive Summary: Conference on Minority Issues in Special Education,” available at [www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights/conferences/SpecEd/exsummary.html](http://www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights/conferences/SpecEd/exsummary.html)
4. The phrase “test factory” as a description of schools that abandon broad curricular goals and creative teaching to focus narrowly on producing gains in standardized test scores comes from the work of Dianne Ashby (2000). See also Haney (2001).
5. For further discussion of the ways in which accountability can transform school superintendents’ beliefs about their responsibilities for educating all children well, see Skrla and Scheurich (2001).

## References

- Artiles, A.J. (1998). The dilemma of difference: Enriching the disproportionality discourse with theory and context. *Journal of Special Education* 32(1), 32–36.
- Ashby, D.E. (2000, February). *The standards issue in preparing school leaders: Moving toward higher quality preparation and assessment*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of School Administrators, San Francisco, CA.
- Ford, D.Y., & Harmon, D.A. (2001). Equity and excellence: Providing access to gifted education for culturally diverse students. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education* 11, 141–8.
- Garcia, E.E. (1999). Reforming education and its cultures. *American Behavioral Scientist* 42(6), 1072–91.
- Haney, W. (2001). *Revisiting the myth of the Texas miracle in education: Lessons about drop-out research and drop-out prevention*. Paper presented at the conference of the Harvard Civil Rights Project and Achieve, Inc., Cambridge, MA.
- Haynes, N.M., & Comer, J.P. (1996). Integrating schools, families, and communities through successful school reform: The School Development Program. *School Psychology Review* 25(4), 501–6.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lopez, G., Scribner, J.D., & Mahitivanichcha, K. (2001). Redefining parental involvement: Lessons from high-performing, migrant-impacted schools. *American Educational Research Journal* 38(2), 253–88.
- Moll, L.C. (1992). Bilingual classroom studies and community analysis: Some recent trends. *Educational Researcher* 21(2), 20–24.
- Reyes, P., Scribner, J.D., & Paredes Scribner, A. (1999). *Lessons from high-performing Hispanic schools: Creating learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Scheurich, J.J., Skrla, L., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). Thinking carefully about equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 82(4), 293–99.
- Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J.J. (2001). Displacing deficit thinking in school district leadership. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 239–55.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement-focused school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A.Dana Center.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., Johnson, J.F., & Koschoreck, J.W. (2001). Complex and contested constructions of accountability and educational equity. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 4, 277–83.
- Townsend, B.L. (2000). The disproportionate discipline of African American learners: Reducing school suspensions and expulsions. *Exceptional Children* 66, 381–391.



## **PART II**

# **The Effect of Accountability Policy on Educational Equity**



# **CHAPTER 5**

## **Accountability for Equity**

### *Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice?*

**LINDA SKRLA, JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH, JOSEPH  
F. JOHNSON, JR., AND JAMES W. KOSCHORECK**

#### **Introduction**

Considerable empirical evidence exists that academic achievement levels in U.S. public schools for African-American, Latina/Latino American, Native-American, and some Asian-American (particularly Filipino, Vietnamese, and Laotian; see Kiang, Nguyen, & Sheehan 1995; Schram, 1993; Sheets & Gay, 1996) children remain significantly below those of their White peers, regardless of how that achievement is defined or measured, that is, standardized test scores, graduation rates, college admission rates, enrollment in advanced courses (Banks, 1997; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lewis, Jepson, & Casserly, 1999).

Further, there is equally strong evidence that children of color experience negative and inequitable treatment in typical public schools (LadsonBillings 1994; Scheurich & Laible, 1995; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). This detrimental treatment impacts students of color in numerous ways. Throughout the United States they are consistently, routinely over-assigned to special education; segregated based on their home languages; tracked into low-level classes; overrepresented in disciplinary cases; disproportionately pushed out of school and labeled drop-outs; afforded differential access to resources and facilities; and immersed in negative, “subtractive” school climates (Bliss, 1993; Delpit, 1988; NCEs, 1998; Nieto, 1994; Oakes, 1993; Ortiz, 1997; Parker, 1993; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Trueba, 1989; Valdés, 1998; Valenzuela 1999). As Valencia (1997) summarized, “Millions of...minority students (particularly, African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans) attend schools that are segregated, inequitably financed, vapid in curricula delivery, teacher centered and generally hostile in any sense of a learning environment” (p. 1).

These twin injustices, the “persistent, pervasive, and disproportionate” underachievement by children of color and their injurious treatment in our schools, are compelling evidence that the U.S. public educational system largely remains systemically racist (Lomotey, 1990, p. 2). That this racism may not be consciously intended or seen by educators—it is institutional and, thus, is

systemically embedded in mindsets and assumptions, policies and procedures, and practices and structures of schooling, rather than in the conscious or overt acts of individuals—does not erase the pain and damage this racism does to children of color and to their life chances (Deyhle, 1995; Kozol, 1991; Ove & Stockel, 1997; Shujaa, 1994). Every school day more than 17 million Latina/Latino American, African-American, Native-American, and Asian-American children (NCES, 2000) experience the real-life manifestations of systemic racism in our schools.

Thus, the need for immediate, widespread, sustainable, equitable schooling for large numbers of children of color is enormous. Furthermore, most broad policy remedies up to this point have not worked to any useful degree. Despite nearly a half-century's worth of national- and state-level policy initiatives driven by dozens of reports and commissions calling for school reform, despite billions of dollars spent on remedial and compensatory programs, and despite the often heroic efforts of administrators and teachers in individual schools, the fact that, broadly speaking, our children experience differential levels of success in school that is distributed along race and social class lines continues to be the overridingly central problem of education, the most "persistent and enduring dilemma of schooling" (Hatch, 1998, p. 4) in the United States.

Waiting and hoping for some new policy miracle or some single solution to the persistent, widespread inequities in school success that are manifestations of institutional racism are not going to improve the situation for the millions of children of color in U.S. schools who continue to be shortchanged on an everyday basis. Instead, what is critically needed is real-life, context-specific, tactical, anti-racist work in our schools. We need the kind of tactical, sensible anti-racist work Jill Blackmore (1999), an Australian feminist, called for to promote gender equity.

Tactical feminism is about working for gender equity on a daily basis in any specific site. Tactical feminism is about understanding and building upon what we have learnt from feminist practices and histories in gender equity reforms; about providing sensible alternatives, while also being alert to their dangers. Sensible feminism recognizes that *desired social change will not evolve if there is no immanent practical possibility for change*—personally, institutionally, and politically [emphasis added], (p. 210)

This same kind of tactical approach is essential for anti-racist work in U.S. schools. Such tactical anti-racist, pro-equity work must take into consideration, as Blackmore pointed out, the immanent practical possibilities for change. In other words, in considering what educational policies and practices are desirable and beneficial for more equitable and socially just schooling, we likewise must consider what educational policies and practices are possible in the current historical moment. In the United States at present this means considering what

policies and practices are possible given an overwhelmingly dominant national focus on accountability. It means considering how it might be possible to use the powerful force of accountability policy to actually leverage more socially just schooling.

We explore this possibility in detail in subsequent sections of this chapter. Our work is not, however, a neutral exploration of the terrain surrounding the current, often highly polarized, debates about accountability and educational equity. Instead, we present here an advocacy for working in practical ways within existing accountability policy structures to promote social justice in U.S. public schooling. By “social justice,” we mean a definition similar to that of Adams, Bell, & Griffin (1997):

Social justice is both a process and a goal. [It means] full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities), and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others), (p. 3)

Social justice in schooling, then, would mean that the children of all people, regardless of race, would benefit academically at uniformly high levels in school environments in which they are safe and secure. It would mean that school success would be equitable across such differences as socioeconomic status and race. Although we advocate working toward such a vision of social justice in U.S. schools through tactical engagement with accountability policy, we do so in a way that acknowledges the complexities surrounding issues of accountability and social justice. We draw from the work of a number of scholars, supporters and critics of accountability, as well as from our own work, to illustrate our points. We begin with a section in which we suggest that systemic racism is pervasive in U.S. schools, that this racism deeply violates the fundamental basis of democracy, and that broad impact policies are required if this racism and its effects are to be reduced and eliminated. This is followed by a discussion of the debates surrounding accountability and equity. A third section explores the possibility of a convergence of interests between supporters of accountability and advocates for social justice. Two subsequent sections outline evidence at state and school district levels that appear to support increased educational equity through the use of accountability measures. The final section contains concluding comments.

### **Systemic Racism in U.S. Schools**

In the global media and in international politics the United States presents itself as a fair and just nation founded on democratic ideals, a nation in which every



citizen is to be treated equally in any public arena and in many private arenas. Indeed, it is not difficult to argue that this commitment to a fair and just democracy, whether as truth, or imaginary, or both, is deeply central to the power, position, and politics of the United States internationally. It is also deeply central to how the White citizenry sees itself and U.S. society. In the national imaginary of Whites, in their social, psychological sense of who they are as a people, a sense that is both public and social but also personal and individual, Whites see the United States as the epitome of a fair and just democracy that treats each and every citizen equally.

Violations, assertions of violations, or evidence of violations to this imaginary can, thus, damage the United States and its citizenry internationally, nationally, and personally. In fact, most critiques of the U.S. both from outside and inside the country, usually are founded on contentions that the U.S. is violating its own commitments to be a fair and just democracy. Arguably, racism is the most persistent violation of its commitments for which the U.S. is accused. For example, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, in its appeal to the general public and to the political leadership, was primarily based on calling for the U.S. to enforce its commitment to be a fair and just democracy for all its citizens (Bell, 1980). But this appeal to democratic fairness and justice is not just of the past. Almost daily, the public media address such issues as: racial profiling by various branches of law enforcement; racial bias in employment; inequitable treatment of people of color by banks, real-estate agents, and retail outlets; racism in who gets arrested, gets adequate legal assistance, is convicted, receives longer sentences, and suffers the death penalty; and racially based economic and housing differences (Estrin, 1999). In each of these areas, the violations of the U.S. imaginary are founded directly on the appeal to democratic fairness and justice.

Of all these appeals to democratic fairness and justice that continue to be raised to awaken our collective conscience, though, the unfairness evident in school performance and in treatment of children in public schools based on race and ethnicity is among the appeals about which there should be the most serious concern. Because of this inequitable treatment and performance, there is a critical need to address the root causes of the persistent school achievement gap and the inequitable treatment of children of color in our schools. As Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, eloquently put it: "Closing the gap has to be a societal goal. To do otherwise is to admit to failure, tolerate racial differences, and give up on the very fundamental ideals of America" (quoted in Johnston & Viadero, 2000, p. 1).

To accomplish the societal goals of closing the school achievement gap and providing for equitable treatment for all children in schools, it seems logical that researchers, politicians, policy analysts, and educational practitioners should look for solutions to the places where evidence of high levels of success for all students currently exists in U.S. schools. That such places exist, and exist in growing numbers, has been documented in the literature (Cawelti, 1999; Comer,

1984; Foster, 1994; González, Huerta-Macías, & Tinajero, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999; Scheurich, 1998; Shirley, 1997; Trueba, 1991). In fact, for the past two decades, beginning with the effective schools movement (Edmonds, 1979, 1986), stories of schools that work for all students have been in widespread circulation. However, these stories have been almost exclusively about single campuses. As Ferguson (1998) pointed out:

Credible claims of remarkable progress for a few students, a few classrooms, or a few schools are common enough. Such successes are regarded as special cases, dependent on a few talented leaders. The more interesting and formidable challenge is to replicate success for many students in many classrooms across many schools, by improving the performance of many average teachers and administrators, (p. 342)

In other words, we have many examples of individual schools that are highly successful with all students and have achieved academic results that far exceed public stereotypes or general expectations of high poverty schools, but we have almost no examples of district-, region-, or statewide success for children of color (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999). For example, according to Lomotey (1990), “One cannot identify a particular region of the country, a state, a city, or a school district that has been successful for any period of time in educating the majority of African Americans in their charge” (p. 2).

Using a campus-by-campus approach for transforming U.S. public schools into places where all children, regardless of race or social class, experience success at high levels and are treated fairly is highly inefficient and certainly too slow to meet the escalating demands placed on schools by rapid societal changes. In order to face up to our responsibilities to the children of color who persistently are being underserved and ill treated in our schools, to address seriously the cold fact that “the disparities in student achievement are too wide and too few of us have moved aggressively enough on this critical challenge” (Lewis, Jepson, & Casserly, 1999, p. 4), we must find ways to create academic success for all children through broad impact policies. We must seek ways that entire school districts, regions, and states in which all schools, not just isolated campuses, can be places where children of color perform at the same levels as middle-class White students.

### **Accountability and Equity?**

Any serious effort to achieve equitable school performance must, however, take into consideration the embeddedness of schooling within larger societal contexts. Butchart (1994) emphasized this point in “Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World,” arguing for scholarship that offers “an understanding of

the sources of oppression within which Blacks [or other races] experience life” (p. 109). Further, such scholarship must be

Built upon the priority of African-American liberty, but bring with it an ability to explain rather than simply lament the denial of liberty. It would have a vision of what African American education should have been and should be, but would be able to explain why it was not and is not. (p. 109)

Similarly, any attempts to advance an agenda that has at its center the equitable school success of literally all children must consider the “broader intellectual currents in American society and how, filtered through the lens of race, they... influence Black [and by extension Latina/Latino American, Native-American, and Asian-American] education” (Butchart, 1994, p. 108). This means addressing current educational policy contexts that are themselves structured by larger political, economic, and social contexts.

Educational policy arenas, both in the United States and other countries, currently are dominated by accountability concerns (Ball 1994, 1999; Linn, 2000; Popkewitz, 2000; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998). Driven by global economics and supported by policy actors all along the political continuum from left to right, accountability movements have impacted the educational systems of Western liberal democracies, such as the UK, Canada, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, with remarkable simultaneity and similarity.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, specifically, public education issues have risen to the top of national and state political agendas (EIA, 1998). Furthermore, annual expenditures for public education consume a larger share of states’ budgets than any other state function (nearly 40% in most cases). The political and economic importance of public education in the current economy has led to increased public demands for accountability. This accountability movement has spawned a variety of national and state policy responses, including establishment of national and state curriculum standards, increased use of standardized testing, development of new certification requirements for educators, evolution of highly structured personnel evaluation systems, and implementation of a variety of fiscal accountability measures.

As Olson (1999) pointed out, accountability is currently the single most prominent issue in educational policy at the national, state, and local level:

It’s a very American set of ideas: Take responsibility for your actions. Focus on results. And reap—or rue—the consequences. And these days, it can be summed up in one word: accountability. After decades of focusing on such “inputs” as how many books are in the school library and the number of computers in the classroom, American education is shining a spotlight on results. In more and more states, policymakers are moving to reward success and punish failure in an effort to ensure that children are getting a good education, (p. 8)

Legislators, policy makers, business leaders, educators, parents, and other individuals and groups connected to public education at all levels have begun to look to accountability systems, especially those designed and implemented at the state level, to realize the ideal that “equity and excellence need *not* be mutually exclusive goals” [emphasis added] (Viadero, 1999, p. 24). Accordingly, 48 states now test their students, 36 publish annual report cards on individual schools, 19 publicly identify low-performing schools, 19 require students to pass state tests to graduate from high school, and 14 provide monetary rewards for individual schools based on performance (“Demanding Results,” 1999).

Furthermore, there is growing evidence from several states (e.g. Connecticut, Kentucky, New York, North Carolina, and Texas, among others) that state policy initiatives that resulted in accountability systems for public schools have improved student performance for all students (as measured by state achievement tests, National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], and Advanced Placement [AP] exams) (Grissmer & Flanagan, 1998; Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000; TEA, 1996). At the same time, there is also evidence of narrowing of the achievement gap between the performance of children of color and low-income children and that of their White and more economically advantaged peers. In Texas, for example, the gaps in passing rates on all parts of the state criterion referenced achievement test (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills or TAAS) between African-American, Latina/Latino American or Hispanic,<sup>2</sup> and economically disadvantaged students and those of White students have closed significantly within the past 5 years. On the mathematics portion of TAAS (for all students tested, including special education students) there was a 34-point difference in the passing rate for African-American students statewide compared with White students (36% versus 70%) in 1994. In 2000, this gap had been cut in half to 17 points (76% versus 93%) at the same time that the performance of both groups improved significantly on these measures (TEA, 2000e). Texas has seen improvements also on other measures of student performance, including NAEP scores and Advanced Placement (AP) exams (Fuller & Johnson, 2001).<sup>3</sup>

However, not all researchers, policy analysts, politicians, or practitioners agree with present systems and processes of holding teachers, schools, and school districts accountable for test performance, drop-out rates, and attendance of students as appropriate or desirable. Neither is there agreement on whether state accountability policies truly promote more socially just schooling, as defined by narrowed achievement score gaps or some other measure of more equitable school treatment for all children (Ball, 1999; Linn, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Slee, Weiner, & Tomlinson, 1998). Some researchers view the entire accountability policy approach as problematic in that such policy is based on the assumption that the scores posted by Whites and affluent students are the norm and those displayed by children of color and low SES children are the problem (Knight, 1999). In fact, strong arguments can be made against race comparative policies because the use of the cultural norms of one group to establish meaning

of any sort for another group may be inappropriate and may perpetuate false and negative racist and classist stereotypes (see, e.g., Hood, 1998, or Parker, 2000). Further, there is widespread support for the position that high-stakes testing and accountability measures systematically disadvantage children of color (Jencks, 1998). For this reason, activist organizations such as the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF), the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have filed lawsuits in federal court against states over high stakes accountability measures (such as withholding high school diplomas from students who fail state standardized tests) on the grounds that the tests are biased and discriminate against Latina/Latino and African-American children (TEA, 2000b).

Other criticisms of accountability systems and standardized testing come from teachers, teacher educators, and researchers (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Falk, 1995; Gallagher, 2000; Haney 1996, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Orfield & Wald, 2000; Reese & Gordon, 1999; Valencia, 1997). Gallagher (2000) offered a useful summary of these critiques:

It seems to me that teachers have already produced a multifaceted, substantive, and persuasive critique of the corporatization and standardization of educational assessment, arguing that these “reforms”

- support functionalist views of teaching and learning by reducing classroom work to practice in discrete skills and the transmission of bodies of knowledge;
- wrest control of classrooms from the hands of teachers and place it in the hands of remote experts, thus alienating teachers (and students) from their work;
- divert teachers’ and students’ attention away from the intrinsic rewards of education and toward extrinsic sanctions;
- focus our attention on the least important or useful information about learning (“lower order” skills, mechanical correctness), rather than on those we consider most important (“higher order” skills, process);
- narrow and often water down the curriculum, placing emphasis on the knowledge and skills that remote outsiders deem most important or at least most easily measured; and
- unfairly disadvantage second-language students and students from non-majority backgrounds; and divert our attention from the real, structural problems of education, (p. 504)

In addition, some scholars have leveled many of these same criticisms specifically at the often publicly lauded Texas accountability system, for example, Haney (2000); Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher (2000); and

McNeil (2000). For example, Reese and Gordon (1999), drawing their conclusions from a survey of 923 Texas teachers, maintained that:

No one would argue that increases in passing rates and especially gains by minorities are not positive outcomes of the high-stakes TAAS. But at what cost? Lower-achieving students are forced to focus on minimum skills and rarely have opportunities to move beyond them, while higher achieving students on low-performing campuses are less likely to be challenged. Teachers who are pressured to teach to minimum skills use restrictive teaching strategies to ensure success on the test. As a result, the entire educational system is stressed and the broader mission of public education is endangered, (p. 11)

Obviously, then, there are scholars, drawing on empirical evidence, who are making strong arguments against current state accountability systems as a policy level in support of increased equity.

However, there is also empirical evidence, some of which comes from our own studies (Johnson, 1998; Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999; Scheurich, 1998; STAR Center, 1997) and others (Knight, 1999; Muller & Schiller, 2000; Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999), that indicates that these systems can be useful for increasing equity. As we have discussed elsewhere (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000), accountability systems are complex, and it should not be surprising that their equity effects are contradictory. What we are arguing here, however, partially based on our own research with school districts that have demonstrated records of increasing equity, is that accountability has real, significant, tactical possibilities for improving educational equity on a wider than school-by-school basis.

### **Convergence of Interests**

Given the intensely complex and problematic political and policy context of schooling in current times, as illustrated by the critiques of accountability summarized above, it would be easy to conclude that there is scant hope for making any significant, widespread, sustainable decrease in the performance gaps and the inequitable treatment of children of color in our schools. But schooling is not lived out in the pages of research journals or the floors of legislative sessions. Millions of school children attend school daily in 15,000 U.S. public school districts and are taught by teachers and led by administrators. And millions of Latina/Latino American, African-American, Native-American, and Asian-American children continue routinely and pervasively to be educationally shortchanged and mistreated by their schools. Similarly, accountability policy has an enormous, daily, and growing presence in the lives of the children, teachers, and administrators in these same schools.

We believe that it is possible to appropriate some of the tools of accountability systems and to use them to leverage positive change to benefit all children. We think it is possible, desirable, and indeed necessary, that we take advantage of the space where the interests of those supporting accountability movements converge with those of us who are interested in promoting more socially just schooling outcomes. According to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998), the possibility for change is high in places and spaces where the interests of people of color and the interests of Whites intersect. The notion that such “interest-convergence” is a likely and strategic place to do justice-oriented work has a long and distinguished history in the tradition of critical race theory (see, e.g., Bell, 1980).

We are persuaded by evidence from longitudinal state achievement data and our own in-depth field research in increasingly equitable school districts that it is possible for accountability systems to impact positively the school achievement and experiences of children of color. We think that the urgent need for widespread improvement in the schooling of children of color compels all of us to consider carefully, at a minimum, the possibility that accountability systems can offer us powerful tools to be used to leverage more just schooling (Scheurich & Skrla 1998). Further, we think there is strong evidence that many, many practitioners, especially practitioners of color, but also some White practitioners committed to equity, have been doing just that (Hall, 2002). In fact, it was the compelling stories of practitioners (Scheurich, 1998) and our own “practitioner” experiences in Texas public schools that first drew our attention to the prospect of leveraging accountability to decrease systemically racist schooling practices. Indeed, one of us (Scheurich) was strongly against standardized testing and state accountability systems prior to his study of individual Texas schools that were substantially improving educational equity, especially those led by principals of color who had totally transformed schools that were previously low performing (Scheurich, 1998).

We readily acknowledge, however, that using accountability systems to improve school achievement for children of color will probably not achieve the highest ideals many of us hold for critically oriented, culturally centered, or the best college-preparatory school experiences for African-American, Latina/Latino American, Native-American, and other children of color. We agree with Shujaa (1994), Hilliard (1995), Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995), Shujaa and Afrik (1996), Valencia (1997), and Valenzuela (1999) that simply improving the performance gap and negative treatment that children of color experience within the existing structures of schools will not necessarily lead to the kind of schooling that values, supports, validates, challenges, and nurtures Latina/Latino American, African American, Native-American, and Asian-American children.<sup>4</sup> Also, we want to emphasize strongly that we support those who are engaged in the work of creating, operating, and researching schools that accomplish the latter through various approaches, including culturally centered orientations; see, for example, Lomotey (1992) and Shujaa (1994) on Afrocentric schools.

Thus, we are *not* saying that working within the context of accountability to leverage more just educational outcomes will attain our ideals. And certainly we understand that accountability is a tension-fraught, perilous, partial solution. Nonetheless, we have empirical evidence from our studies of Texas schools and districts, and from various studies of our colleagues, that indicates clearly that there are individual schools and districts that have used and are using the accountability system to drive increased educational equity. What we are talking about is not heaven but moving low SES children and children of color from the “basement” of the public school system to the main floor, the same main floor that middle-class White children have had all along. That is, in our view, accountability systems have the tactical potential to raise the baseline of acceptable academic achievement for all children, including children of color, to levels at least the same as middle-class White children have experienced for some time. Though this is absolutely not where we think achievement levels belong for any or all children, it is a step, a significant step. Accordingly, some components of some accountability systems, like the Texas requirement that schools and districts must serve equally well all racial groups of children, have the potential to increase educational equity across entire districts, regions, and states.

### **Accountability at the State Level**

We now turn our discussion of how state accountability systems can be used to leverage better schooling outcomes for children of color to one particular state accountability system, the one used in Texas. We do this for two reasons: first, it is the system with which we are most familiar because we have worked with it at the practitioner and university level since its inception in 1991; and, second, the Texas system is unique among the 50 states, owing to several components that we think make possible more equitable and just schooling.

#### *Origins*

For the origins of the Texas accountability system (TEA, 2000d):

Go back to 1984 when the Texas Legislature for the first time sought to emphasize student achievement as the basis for accountability. That year, House Bill 72 called for a system of accountability based primarily on student performance. Prior to that, accountability focused mostly on process, that is, districts were checked to see if their schools had been following rules, regulations, and sound educational practices, (n. p.)

In addition to laying the groundwork for the accountability system with House Bill 72, the legislature that year also passed numerous other education reforms, including competency testing for teachers, mandatory small class sizes (22



students in Grades K-4), and no pass, no play rules for extracurricular participation by students (Brooks, 1999). Also in 1984, MALDEF successfully sued the state to equalize funding between poor and wealthy districts, succeeding in state court a decade after an earlier funding lawsuit that reached the U.S. Supreme Court failed.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the class size limits and funding equalization requirements are particularly important components of relevant policy changes in Texas, components that often are ignored by both those commending Texas policies and those criticizing them (for one notable exception, see Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). As Gary Orfield of Harvard and Doug Rogers, Executive Director of the Association for Texas Professional Educators, have both pointed out, lower class sizes and increased, more equitable funding have created a context in which the accountability system could increase equity (see Brooks, 1999; Johnson, 1998).

Especially remarkable and critical to its stability, the Texas accountability system has been supported from the enabling legislation in 1984, through its initial development, up to its implementation in 1991, and during its refinement to the present day by a succession of both Democratic and Republican governors. Also the system has enjoyed strong support from the Texas business community. In fact, Texas Business and Education Coalition (TBEC) executive director John Stevens has played an active and vital role in ensuring the long term bipartisan support for the accountability system.

However, the Texas accountability system has not been without its critics. Social conservatives and the far right on the State Board of Education, policy think tanks such as the Texas Public Policy Foundation, and local and regional taxpayers' coalition groups have at times been sharply critical of the system and have lobbied for its demise, as have some teacher groups. The state associations for administrators and school board members generally have been supportive. Also, the Texas accountability system has received high marks in national rankings of educational policy initiatives from such publications and groups as the Heritage Foundation (Palmaffy, 1998), *Education Week* (Jerald, 2000), and the Fordham Foundation (Finn, Petrilli, & Vanourek, 1998).

### *Components*

The following text quoted from the TEA Web site provides a succinct overview of the complexity and long-term development of the components of the Texas accountability system (TEA, 2000d).

Since the first year of the AEIS (Academic Excellence Indicator System) (1990–91), it has developed and evolved through legislative amendments, the recommendations of advisory committees and the commissioner of education, State Board of Education actions, and final development by Texas Education Agency researchers and analysts.

The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) pulls together a wide range of information on the performance of students in each school and district in Texas every year. This information is put into the annual AEIS reports, which are available each year in November. The performance indicators include:

- TAAS passing rate by grade, by subject, and by all grades tested;
- End-of-Course examination passing rate;
- Attendance Rate for the full year;
- Dropout Rate by year;
- High School completion rate;
- percentage of high school students completing an advanced course;
- percentage of graduates completing the Recommended High School Program;
- AP (Advanced Placement) and IB (International Baccalaureate) examination results;
- TAAS/TASP equivalency rate; and
- SAT and ACT examination participation and results.

Performance on each of these indicators is shown disaggregated by ethnicity, special education, and low-income status. The reports also provide extensive information on school and district staff, finances, programs, and demographics, (n. p.)

Beyond the reporting function of the AEIS, however, lies the public rating of schools and districts based on the performance of students. These ratings are tied significantly to both sanctions and rewards.

But perhaps the most important feature of the AEIS, the one that differs from all other states and the one that we believe is partially driving widespread improvement, is that students are tested on a stable, criterion referenced test (thus providing a fixed target that is the same for all students as opposed to basing achievement on comparison with the performance of other test takers as norm-referenced tests do) and that scores are disaggregated by race and SES, with schools and districts held accountable for the achievement of all student groups.<sup>6</sup> As Jerald (2000) summarized, “Texas remains the only state to hold schools accountable for helping poor and minority students meet the same achievement benchmarks as their peers.”

This combination of equity-oriented components is a critically important (but often overlooked) feature of the Texas accountability system. Johnson (1998) explains:

The Texas accountability system accredits and rates schools and school districts based not on their compliance with rules, nor on their implementation of required or recommended processes, but on the

academic achievement of students. The system focuses on results. Not only does the system focus on the results of students in the aggregate, but also it focuses on the academic achievement of groups of students (disaggregated by race and socio-economics). Thus, in Texas it is not possible to earn a good accreditation rating simply by achieving good results for most students. Even when students, on average, are doing well, schools can still be considered low performing if Hispanic students are not doing well. Even if the school has historically thought of itself as a great school, it will not be rated as such if it is failing to achieve great results for African American students. Furthermore, the system does not bend to the litany of excuses to which American education has become accustomed. Schools in Houston's Fifth Ward and schools in the colonias of the Rio Grande Valley or the barrios of El Paso are held to precisely the same standards as the most affluent schools in the suburbs of Dallas or Austin, (n. p.)

Thus, schools in the 1,046 public school districts and 100-plus charter schools in Texas, since 1991, have had the performance gaps among different groups of their children publicly reported, and have been held accountable for closing them.<sup>7</sup> The minimal acceptable pass rate for any one group of students on any of the TAAS sub-tests (reading, writing, and mathematics) required to maintain an acceptable performance rating started at a low threshold (25%), but it has been raised in 5% increments through time to the current level of 50%. To earn one of the higher accreditation ratings, schools and districts must have passing rates no lower than 80% (for recognized) or 90% (for exemplary) for all student groups on all tests. Also, the accountability system has been revised through time to include the performance of more students (such as students receiving special education services and students identified as Limited English Proficient [LEP]) who in early years were exempt from the exams. In 1999–2000, 90.2% of all students in the grades tested (3–8 and 10) took TAAS; 7.1% were exempt for special education status and 1.3% were exempt because of LEP status; 1.4% were absent or exempt for other reasons (TEA, 2000a).

Several of these components, then, are critical. Certainly more equitable funding and limits on class size are relevant to increased equity. A criterion-referenced test, with the same standard for all, is much better in our view than a norm-referenced test, with different standards for different groups. That schools and districts are responsible for the equal success of all disaggregated groups, including by race and class (indicated by participation in the “free and reduced” lunch program), ends the hiding of academic failure for some student groups behind school and district averages. The annual publication in the media and on the Texas Education Agency's Web site (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/>) of all school and district data (disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and gender) performs an important democratic function of public disclosure. For example, in our research on districts doing well academically for children of color and children of low SES families, this public disclosure was key to

communities of color, activist groups, local media, and judges in still-existing desegregation cases forcing or leveraging schooling improvements for these children. Furthermore, the slowly rising bar for acceptable performance gave schools and districts a chance to learn and apply the system, whereas starting with too high or too low of a bar would have damaged the possibilities for the system as a whole to be accepted and maintained. In addition, the combination of both rewards and sanctions, of pressure and assistance, has played a significant role. While this certainly does not encompass all of the numerous components of the Texas system, in our opinion those we have discussed here are some of the critical ones.

### Examples of Results

The increase in passing rates for all student groups and the closing of the achievement gap between groups from 1994 to 2000 has been impressive, as [Table 5.1](#) illustrates. By 2000, the state of Texas school system of nearly 4 million children was approaching the criterion for recognized status that individual schools and districts had to meet: that 80% of all students and each student group pass the reading, mathematics, and writing sections of TAAS. This stands in sharp contrast to 1994 TAAS performance, at which time percentages of students passing the different sub-tests for several groups were in the 30–40% range. In addition, the improved performance on TAAS has been matched by other measures of student learning, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). According to an article in the 2000 edition of the *Education Week* special publication *Quality Counts* (Jerald, 2000):

One state that has dramatically improved scores for poor and minority youngsters is Texas, where black and Hispanic 4th graders surpassed their peers in nearly every other state on the 1996 NAEP math exam. The state's minority students again broke the curve on NAEP's 1998 writing test. 20% of Texas' Hispanic 8th graders scored at the proficient level on that exam, compared with 10% nationwide. Among the state's black 8th graders, 20% scored proficient or higher, compared with only 7% nationwide and 15% in the next-highest state, Connecticut. In fact, Texas' African American and Hispanic students performed as well as or better than the average 8th grader in the other populous, ethnically diverse states of California, Florida, and New York. That kind of progress doesn't happen by accident.

A recent analysis by the RAND organization (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000) confirmed the longitudinal progress Texas students have made on NAEP exams. Texas was one of two states making the greatest overall gains (the other was North Carolina), and Texas's children of color ranked at the top of the nation compared with their peers in other states. Additionally, the

Table 5.1 Selected State AEIS Data Seven Year History

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000 <sup>a</sup>	Change 1994-2000
TAAS ALL TESTS TAKEN								
ALL STUDENTS	55.6%	60.7%	67.1%	73.2%	77.7%	78.3%	79.9%	+24.3%
AFRICAN-AMERICAN	33.3%	38.3%	46.9%	55.7%	62.6%	64.0%	68.0%	+34.7%
HISPANIC	41.1%	46.1%	54.2%	61.9%	68.1%	70.1%	71.8%	+30.7%
WHITE	69.4%	74.8%	79.8%	84.9%	87.9%	87.9%	89.3%	+19.9%
ECO. DISADVANTAGED	39.0%	44.8%	52.5%	60.2%	66.4%	67.9%	70.0%	+31.0%
TAAS READING								
ALL STUDENTS	76.5%	78.4%	80.4%	84.0%	87.0%	86.5%	87.4%	+10.9%
AFRICAN-AMERICAN	60.2%	63.0%	66.8%	73.2%	78.2%	78.2%	80.8%	+20.6%
HISPANIC	64.9%	67.9%	70.3%	74.3%	79.5%	79.5%	80.7%	+15.8%
WHITE	87.2%	88.4%	90.0%	92.4%	94.2%	93.7%	94.3%	+ 7.1%
ECO. DISADVANTAGED	62.9%	66.1%	68.4%	73.7%	78.4%	78.2%	79.8%	+16.9%

TAAS MATHEMATICS									
ALL STUDENTS	60.5%	65.9%	74.2%	80.1%	84.2%	85.7%	87.4%	+26.9%	
AFRICAN-AMERICAN	38.1%	43.8%	55.0%	64.1%	70.5%	72.8%	77.0%	+38.9%	
HISPANIC	47.1%	52.3%	63.9%	71.8%	77.7%	80.7%	82.9%	+35.8%	
WHITE	73.3%	79.2%	85.0%	89.5%	91.9%	92.5%	93.6%	+20.3%	
ECO. DISADVANTAGED	45.0%	51.4%	62.3%	70.5%	76.1%	78.7%	81.1%	+36.1%	
TAAS WRITING									
ALL STUDENTS	79.0%	82.0%	82.9%	85.3%	87.4%	88.2%	88.2%	+ 9.2%	
AFRICAN-AMERICAN	65.8%	70.5%	72.8%	76.1%	80.4%	81.9%	82.4%	+16.6%	
HISPANIC	69.6%	73.4%	74.2%	77.6%	80.9%	83.1%	82.3%	+12.7%	
WHITE	87.6%	89.7%	90.5%	92.5%	93.4%	93.1%	94.0%	+ 6.4%	
ECO. DISADVANTAGED	67.7%	71.5%	72.9%	76.0%	79.7%	81.4%	81.3%	+13.6%	
DISTRICT STUDENT COMPOSITION									
AFRICAN-AMERICAN	14.3%	14.3%	14.3%	14.3%	14.4%	14.4%	14.4%		
HISPANIC	35.5%	36.1%	36.7%	37.4%	37.9%	38.6%	39.6%		
WHITE	47.7%	47.1%	46.4%	45.6%	45.0%	44.1%	43.1%		
ECO. DISADVANTAGED	45.1%	46.3%	46.9%	48.1%	48.5%	48.5%	49.0%		

<sup>a</sup>Beginning in the year 2000, results also include Spanish, Grades 5 & 6, and Grade 4, writing test takers.  
 (Source: Texas Education Agency <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/hist/state.html>)

percentages of African American and Latina/ Latino students enrolled in Advanced Placement high school courses doubled between 1995 and 1999 (TEA, 2000c).

### *Improvement at the School District Level*

We have been part of a team that has been involved in field-based research in four Texas school districts that were selected as representative of the best examples of district-wide academic success in high poverty, racially diverse settings.<sup>8</sup> While we are not arguing that these districts are perfect or perfectly equitable, they do have more than just isolated pockets of academic success in individual schools, and they have shown increased equity across a wide range of indicators. These large- and medium-sized Texas districts have achieved a district-wide recognized or exemplary rating (the two highest designations) in the state's accountability system. This means that more than 80% of all students and each student group (African-American, Latina/Latino American, White, and Economically Disadvantaged) passed each section of the state's achievement test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), across all of the district. Demographic characteristics of the four study districts are presented in [Table 5.2](#).

All the districts studied have shown distinctive success in closing the performance gap that historically has existed between the performance of White students and students of color. For example, in Brazosport Independent School District, a district that serves over 13,000 students, of whom 33% are Latina/ Latino American, 9% are African American, and 39% are Economically Disadvantaged, the percentage of students passing all areas tested (reading, writing, and mathematics) at all grade levels on the state criterion-referenced test increased from 68% in 1992 to 94% in 1994.

Further, the district-wide passing rate on all sections of the TAAS improved for African-American children from 43% in 1994 to 88% in 2000, and for Latina/ Latino American children from 52% in 1994 to 91% in 2000. Perhaps most impressively, 17 out of 18 campuses in this district earned either a recognized or exemplary state accountability rating in 2000.

A second study district, Aldine Independent School District, serves nearly 50,000 students at its 56 campuses. The student population in this district is 36% African-American, 47% Latina/Latino American, and 14% White. Passing rates on all sections of TAAS for 2000 were 76% for African American students, 81% for Latina/Latino American students and 89% for White students, in contrast to 45% for African Americans, 56% for Latina/Latino American, and 74% for Whites in 1994.

The improvements in these districts toward more equitable and higher success for all groups of children were not limited to the portion of the curriculum measured by the TAAS tests. All four districts demonstrated evidence of impressive progress on a variety of quantitative measures. For example, the same

Table 5.2 Characteristics of Study Districts

District	Total Students	# of Schools	% African American	% Hispanic	% White	% Low Income	1999-2000 Rating	Location
Aldine	49,453	56	36	47	14	71	Recog.	Metro Houston
Brazosport	13,247	19	9	33	56	39	Exemp.	Gulf Coast
San Benito	8,697	17	0	97	3	87	Recog.	Rio Grande Valley
Wichita Falls	15,293	31	16	18	63	46	Recog.	Northwest Texas



two districts mentioned above had passing rates on the rigorous Algebra End-of-Course test that were literally double the state averages for African-American and Latina/Latino students.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Wichita Falls Independent School District, a district that has over 15,000 students (63% White, 18% Latina/Latino, and 16% African American), has shown steady progress toward closing the gaps on SAT performance among its students. In 1996, SAT I mean scores were 849 for African-American students, 967 for Latina/Latino students, and 1,079 for White students. Two years later, in 1998, mean SAT I scores were 895 for African Americans, 1009 for Latina/Latinos, and 1056 for Whites. In the fourth study district, San Benito Consolidated Independent School District, in which the population is 97% Latina/Latino and 87% Low SES, in 1999 one of every four graduates (27.2%) completed the college-preparatory Recommended High School Program,<sup>10</sup> a figure almost triple the statewide rate for Latina/Latinos (10.9%) and higher than the state rate for White students (17.9%).

Many of the school board members, administrators, and teachers we interviewed in these study districts talked about the pressure they feel to raise student achievement to the extent described above and about the demands this placed on them personally and professionally. However, they also talked about accountability and the Texas testing as useful for driving educational equity. For example, a Latina school-board member in one of our study districts said:

I think that the accountability system has brought with it an expectation for all students that without that expectation or without that framework we may still have had kids come falling through the cracks. They are not learning, they are not doing what they are supposed to be doing and there wasn't any way to measure that: that they were falling through the cracks. I suppose it is a little bit discomfoting to some teachers to think "well, I really am going to be expected to show some results of teaching these kids and there is going to be some measure here." Because, before, I think teachers just taught and they absolutely were working their hardest, they are working very hard now too, but there wasn't any way to determine or to measure the results of that hard work and sometimes the hard work was spinning, you kind of were doing the same thing over and over or doing things that were not effective, and so this has allowed us to look at the system to kind of develop a framework for all kids. So that we are accountable for every single child and so that is the positive part of that. We cannot let a child fail or we know where we let the children fail with this system. At the same time if there are elements of the TAAS test that are hurting our children I think that they are outweighed by the greater good.

A similar view of using TAAS testing and accountability to promote educational equity was expressed by an African American male principal in this exchange with an interviewer.

*Principal:* When I first reported to [this campus] it was perceived as a poverty stricken environment, a poverty stricken climate. We called it PLOM, “poor little ol’ me.” And I had to work with my staff diligently, to matriculate them into “you raise what you praise,” and that you need to treat the children that you intervene with on a day-to-day basis as if you have given birth to all of them... It’s a personal thing and, yes, our kids may come from varying environments, but we touch them for more waking hours than their parents, and we will not allow the lack of parental involvement or environment to be a barrier in reaching the needs of the children. What we will do is to institute a relationship with the parents and the child. First and foremost, we care about them and we’re here to serve them.

*Interviewer:* When you came to [this campus] and they had that “poor little ol’ me” mentality...how did you change the hearts of some of the teachers to embody the philosophy of “you raise what you praise”?

*Principal:* TAAS.

Another example of how the accountability system has altered the thinking of some educators came from a White female central office administrator in one our study districts who indicated:

I was in a school where probably the last year I was there we had a 24% passing rate on TAAS. But that was okay because that was the best we could do and the best the kids would, could do, and we didn’t have the expectations for them. Then, I moved from campus level to district level.... We started looking at teachers who had a 90–95% mastery rate with economically disadvantaged students; we researched it, pulled those teachers out and asked “What are you doing?” And basically they were structuring their day, making sure students were taught the essential elements, then allotting extended thinking and critical thinking and problem solving type things with them, and turning out incredibly successful students. We did it at the first school, and then it spread across the whole district. I was as guilty as anybody in thinking that I was doing everybody a favor by teaching in a school that had large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. And they weren’t expected to be academically on top because of all their other problems. Well, basically, now I think, and I think our staff feels, that we’re the answer to those kids, and we’ve got seven hours a day of quality time with those students, and that there’s no reason for them not to be successful.

While these are only three quotes, we literally have hundreds of similar ones from our study districts.<sup>11</sup>

However, not all districts respond to the state accountability system in the same way. Complex state policies can be blunt instruments, and few foresaw the complicated and contradictory range of effects that would emerge from state accountability systems. While some of those effects appear to promote decreased equity, other effects seem to support increased equity. Given, however, the failed history of past attempts to increase equity, it certainly behooves us to consider carefully the potentially positive effects of the Texas system, especially the ways some schools and districts have used the Texas system to increase equity.

### **Conclusion**

Henry Trueba (1999), in his book *Latinos Unidos*, described the characteristics of a praxis for a pedagogy of hope:

The praxis that accompanies a pedagogy of hope is clearly a conscious detachment from “Whiteness” and from a rigid, dogmatic, and monolithic defense of a Western or North American way of life, schooling codes, and interactional patterns. A simple change of technique and a paternalistic response to “these poor immigrant children” [or to other children of color ill served by public education] will definitely not do. Educators who are serious about their praxis and committed to a pedagogy of hope must be prepared to take a long and hazardous psychological trip into lands and minds unknown before... This praxis is incompatible with despair, negligence, disrespect, and racism, (p. 161)

What we have argued for in this chapter seems consistent with Trueba’s description of a pedagogy of hope. In arguing that educators should give serious consideration to the possibilities of appropriating the powerful juggernaut of state accountability and using it to leverage more socially just and equitable schooling outcomes for children of color, we have certainly embarked on a hazardous trip “into lands and minds unknown.” It has been hazardous for many reasons, not the least of which is the long and gruesome history of standardized testing, and the abuses it has perpetuated upon people of color in the United States and on children of color in United States schools that has been documented so well by Valencia (1997) and Valenzuela (1999), among others.

But also it is the power of accountability that makes it a potentially strong lever for social change, if we can find ways to operate the force of this leverage to open up possibilities for more just and equitable schooling. The problems of the persistent and disproportionate underachievement of children of color and their inequitable treatment in schools, both manifestations of systemic racism, are enormous. Thus, powerful solutions are required. If those of us who are committed to anti-racist work leave accountability untouched because it is, without question, highly problematic, then we risk falling into the same “rigid, dogmatic, and monolithic” defenses of which we accuse the defenders of the

status quo. We cast aside a powerful tool, one which might be used effectively to at long last create widespread, sustained equitable school success for literally all children. What is needed, then, is for educators who are committed to justice and equity to reject either/or arguments, to resist balkanized and totalized positions, to avoid being typecast as either the defenders or the critics of testing and accountability and, instead, to become seriously engaged in a careful consideration of the possibilities and perils of these issues.

We have tried in this chapter to begin this consideration. We have presented our arguments and evidence that accountability can, in particular configurations and in certain uses, leverage social justice. We have included some of the criticisms of and dangers associated with using accountability to promote educational equity, as we understand them. Certainly there are other problems and critiques with accountability and state systems, including the particular issues with those state systems other than Texas, that we have not considered here. We hope, nonetheless, that we have made a compelling case for resisting simplistic conclusions about accountability. Finally, we hope we have provoked further consideration of the powerful potential of accountability and state accountability systems to change the systemically racist nature of schooling.

### Notes

1. The emergence of accountability movements on the international education scene is linked to extremely complicated and complex political, economic, and social forces. The worldwide shift toward discourses and technologies of markets, entrepreneurship, effectiveness, efficiency, quality, and other neoliberal and neoconservative models and manifestations in schooling has been discussed comprehensively by Anderson (1998); Ball (1994, 1999); Blackmore (1999); Popkewitz (2000); Slee, Weiner, and Tomlinson (1998); and Smyth and Shacklock (1998); among others.
2. Many Latina/Latino Americans in Texas prefer the group label “Hispanic” and this is the term the Texas Education Agency uses to report its data.
3. While one recent RAND study (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000) questioned the closing of the equity gap in Texas, another recent RAND study supported the gains for students of color (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). We would suggest that simplistic “either/or” conclusions about this matter are not useful and that a careful, nuanced, balanced consideration of the whole range of evidence is the appropriate approach.
4. There are several models of schooling in the research literature and in actual practice that provide not just acceptable, but truly excellent, education for children of color. Afrocentric and single-race schools (Bell, 1988; Faltz & Leake 1996; Shujaa & Afrik, 1996), critical schools (Bogtoch, Miron, & Murry, 1998; McLaren, 1999), and true college preparatory schools such as Frederick Douglas Academy in Harlem (Cawelti, 1999) are among these.
5. In the *San Antonio School District v. Rodriguez* (411 U.S. 1 1973) decision, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to overturn the Texas system of public school finance,

even though they acknowledged it was flawed, in large part because no acceptable alternatives could be conceptualized at the time. In other words, the system was admittedly bad, but it was not, at the time, deemed irrational: “To the extent that the Texas system of school financing results in unequal expenditures between children who happen to reside in different districts, we cannot say that such disparities are the product of a system that is so irrational as to be invidiously discriminatory” (§ III).

6. TAAS was first administered during the 1990/1991 school year. The tests were adjusted to set a consistent level of difficulty among all grade levels tested (using the 10th-grade Exitlevel as the standard) in 1994. Thus, seven years (1994–2000) of comparable test data are currently available.
7. The Texas accountability system contains both sanctions and rewards for schools and districts that meet (or fail to meet) performance criteria. Rewards include public recognition and monetary awards for schools and principals. Sanctions include site visits, required improvement planning, and assignment of state monitors or masters.
8. The project was funded by the Sid W. Richardson Foundation.
9. This test is given at the completion of Algebra I, traditionally the gatekeeper course to higher level mathematics. It has a high level of difficulty; the percentage of all Texas students passing this test in 1999 was 43.9 (TEA, 2000a).
10. The Recommended High School program requires students to take a more rigorous set of courses than the minimum high-school program, including four credits of English, three credits of mathematics (Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II), three credits of science, four credits of social studies and economics, two credits of the same language other than English, and a variety of other coursework including speech, technology applications, physical education, fine arts, and electives in specialized areas (Title 19 Texas Administration Code, [Part II](#) §74.12).
11. Members of our research team, the four authors, plus Dawn Hogan, and Pam Smith, have made presentations about this study at both the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting (AERA, 1999, 2000) and at the University Council for Educational Administration Annual Conference (UCEA, 1998, 1999, 2000).

## References

- Adams, M., Bell, L.A., & Griffin, P. (1997). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, G.L. (1998). Toward authentic participation: Deconstructing the discourses of participatory reforms in education. *American Educational Research Journal* 35(4), 571–606.
- Ball, S.J. (1994). *Education reform: A critical and post-structural approach*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- . (1999). *Performativities and fabrications in the education economy: Toward the performative society?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne.
- Banks, J.A. (1997). *Educating citizens in a multicultural society*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Bell, D. (1980). *Shades of Brown: New perspectives on school desegregation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- . (1988). The case for a separate black school system. *Urban League Review* 11(1–2), 136–45.
- Blackmore, J. (1999). *Troubling women: Feminism, leadership and educational change*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Bliss, J.R. (1993). Building open climates in urban schools. In P.B.Forsyth & M.Tallerico (Eds.). *City schools: Leading the way* (pp. 131–45). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bogotch, I.E., Miron, L.F., & Murry, J. (1998). Moral leadership discourses in urban school settings: The multiple influences of social context. *Urban Education* 33(3), 303–30.
- Brooks, A.P. (1999, August 1). Bush must share glory of rising TAAS scores [Electronic version]. *Austin American Statesman*.
- Butchart, R. (1994). Outthinking and outflanking the owners of the world. In M.J.Shujaa (Ed.). *Too much schooling too little education: a paradox of Black life in White societies* (pp. 85–122). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Cawelti, G. (1999). *Portraits of six benchmark schools: Diverse approaches to improving student achievement*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.
- Comer, J. (1984). Home-school relationships as they affect the academic success of children. *Education and Urban Society* 16, 323–37.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Aness, J., & Falk, B. (1995). *Studies of schools and students at work*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Delpit, L.D. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in education other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review* 58(3), 280–98.
- Demanding results. (1999). *Education Week* 18(17), 5.
- Deyhle, D. (1995). Navajo youth and Anglo racism: Cultural integrity and resistance. *Harvard Educational Review* 65(3), 403–44.
- Edmonds, R.R. (1979) Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37 (1), 15–18, 20–24.
- . (1986). Characteristics of effective schools. In U.Neisser (Ed.), *The school achievement of minority children: New perspectives* (pp. 93–104). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Education Intelligence Agency (EIA). (1998). *One yard below: Education statistics from a different angle*. Sacramento, CA: Author.
- Estrin, R. (1999, October 2). Study says race plays big role in U.S. culture [Electronic version]. *Austin American Statesman*.
- Faltz, C.J., & Leake, D.O. (1996). The all-black school: Inherently unequal or a culture-based alternative. In M.J.Shujaa (Ed.). *Beyond segregation: The politics of quality in African American schooling* (pp. 227–353). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ferguson, R.F. (1998). Can schools narrow the Black-White test score gap. In C.Jencks & M.Phillips (Eds.). *The Black-White test score gap*, (pp. 318–75). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Finn, C.E., Petrilli, M.J., & Vanourek, G. (1998). *The Fordham report: The state of state standards*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://www.edexcellence.net/standards/summary/summary.htm>
- Foster, M. (1994). Educating for competence in community and culture: Exploring the views of exemplary African American teachers. In M.J.Shujaa (Ed.). *Too much*

- schooling too little education: A paradox of Black life in White societies* (pp. 221–44). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Fuller, E., & Johnson, J.F. (2001). Can state accountability systems drive improvements in school performance for children of color and children from low-income homes? *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 260–83.
- Gallagher, C. (2000). A seat at the table: Teachers reclaiming assessment through rethinking accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 81(7), 502–7.
- González, M.L., Huerta-Macias, A., & Tinajero, J.M. (1998). *Educating Latino students: A guide to successful practice*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic.
- Grissmer, D., & Flanagan, A. (1998). *Exploring rapid achievement gains in North Carolina and Texas*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel.
- Grissmer, D., Flanagan, A., Kawata, J., & Williamson, S. (2000). *Improving student achievement: What NAEP state test scores tell us*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Hall, V. (2002). Reinterpreting entrepreneurship in education: A gender perspective. In C.Reynolds (Ed.). *Women and school leadership: International perspectives* (pp. 13–28). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Haney, W. (1996). Focusing assessments on teaching and learning. *New Schools, New Communities* 12(2), 11–20.
- . (2000, April). *The myth of the “Texas miracle” in educational reform*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Hatch, T. (1998). The differences in theory that matter in the practice of school improvement. *American Educational Research Journal* 35(1), 3–32.
- Hilliard, A.G. (1995). *The maroon within us: Selected essays on African American community socialization*. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press.
- Hood, S. (1998). Culturally responsive performance-based assessment: Conceptual and psychometric considerations. *Journal of Negro Education* 67(3), 187–96.
- Jencks, C. (1998). Racial bias in testing. In C.Jencks & M.Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap* (pp. 55–85). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (1998). *The Black-White test score gap*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Jerald, C. (2000). The state of the states. *Quality counts 2000: Who should teach?* Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc00/templates/article.cfm?slug=sosintro.htm>
- Johnson, J.F. (1998). *The promise of school reform in Texas*. Retrieved from The Charles A.Dana Center Web site: <http://www.starcenter.org/products/articles/prac.html>
- Johnston, R.C., & Viadero, D. (2000, March 15). Unmet promise: Raising minority achievement. *Education Week*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=27gapintro.h19&keywords=Johnston>
- Kiang, P.N., Nguyen, N.L., & Sheehan, R.L. (1995). Don’t ignore it: Documenting racial harassment in a fourth-grade Vietnamese bilingual classroom. *Equity and Excellence in Education* 28(1), 31–35.
- Klein, S.P., Hamilton, L.S., McCaffrey, D. F. & Stecher, B.M. (2000). *What do test scores in Texas tell us?* (Issue Paper 202). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Knight, S.L. (1999, April). *Using evaluation in the service of student learning: Diverse perspectives on detecting and diminishing achievement disparities*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.

- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- . (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11(1), 7–24.
- Lewis, S., Jepson, J., & Casserly, M. (1999). *Closing the achievement gap in urban schools: A survey of academic progress and promising practices in the great city schools*. Retrieved from the Council of the Great City Schools Web site: [http://www.cgcs.org/reports/achievement\\_gaps.html](http://www.cgcs.org/reports/achievement_gaps.html)
- Linn, R.L. (2000). Assessments and accountability. *Educational Researcher* 29(2), 16.
- Lomotey, K. (1990). Introduction. In K.Lomotey (Ed.). *Going to school: The African American experience* (pp. 1–9). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- . (1992). Independent Black institutions: African-centered education. *Journal of Negro education* 61(4), 455–64.
- McLaren, P. (1999). A pedagogy of possibility: Reflecting upon Paulo Freire's politics of education. *Educational Researcher* 28(2), 49–54, 56.
- McNeil, L. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- McNeil, L.M., & Valenzuela, A. (2001). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In G.Orfield and M.L.Kornhaber (Eds.). *Raising standards or raising barriers: Inequality and high-stakes testing in public education* (pp. 127–50). New York: The Century Foundation.
- Muller, C., & Schiller, K.S. (2000, April). *Leveling the playing field? Students' educational attainment and states' performance testing*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (1998). *The condition of education 1998*, Supplemental table 45–3. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/condition98/c9845d03.html>
- . (2000). *Public school student, staff and graduate counts by state, school year 1998–99*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000330>.
- Nieto, S. (1994). Lessons from students on creating a chance to dream. *Harvard Educational Review* 64(4), 392–426.
- Oakes, J. (1993). Tracking, inequality, and the rhetoric of reform: Why schools don't change. In H.S.Shapiro & D.E.Purpel (Eds.). *Critical social issues in American education* (pp. 85–101). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Olson, L. (1999). Shining a spotlight on results. *Education Week*, 18(17), 8–10.
- Orfield, G., & Wald, J. (2000, June 5). Testing, testing. *The Nation* [Electronic version].
- Ortiz, A.A. (1997). Learning disabilities occurring concomitantly with linguistic differences. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 30(3), 321–32.
- Ove, R.S., & Stockel, H. (1997). *Geronimo's kids*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.
- Palmaffy, T. (1998, March/April). The gold star state. *Policy Review* 88, 30–38.
- Parker, L. (1993). Acquiring and using resources. In P.B.Forsyth & M.Tallerico (Eds.). *City schools: Leading the way* (pp. 178–210). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.



- . (2000, April). *Comments for “Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice?”* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Popkewitz, T.S. (2000). The denial of change in educational change: Systems of ideas in the construction of national policy and evaluation. *Educational Researcher* 29(1), 17–29.
- Ragland, M.A., Asera, R., & Johnson, J.F. (1999). *Urgency, responsibility, efficacy: Preliminary findings of a study of high-performing Texas school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center.
- Reese, M., & Gordon, S.P. (1999, October). *Using high stakes test for school reform: A contradiction in terms*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the University Council of Educational Administration, Minneapolis, MN.
- Reyes, P., Scribner, J.D., & Paredes Scribner, A. (1999). *Lessons from high performing Hispanic schools: Creating learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- San Antonio School District v. Rodriguez. 411 U.S. 1 (1973).
- Scheurich, J.J. (1998). Highly successful and loving, public elementary schools populated mainly by low-SES children of color: Core beliefs and cultural characteristics. *Urban Education* 33(4), 451–91.
- Scheurich, J.J., & Laible, J. (1995). The buck stops here—In our preparation programs: Educational leadership for all children (no exceptions allowed). *Educational Administration Quarterly* 31(2), 313–22.
- Scheurich, J.J., & Skrla, L. (1998, Nov. 13). Accountability system works. *Austin American Statesman*, p. A15.
- Scheurich, J.J., Skrla, L., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). Thinking carefully about equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 82(4), 283–99.
- Schram, T. (1993). Laotian refugees in a small-town school: Contexts and encounters. *Journal of Research in Rural Education* 9(3), 125–36.
- Sheets, R.H., & Gay, G. (1996). Student perceptions of disciplinary conflict in ethnically diverse classrooms. *NASSP Bulletin* 80(580), 84–94.
- Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Shujaa, M.J. (1994). *Too much schooling too little education: A paradox of Black life in White societies*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Shujaa, M.J., & Afrik, H.T. (1996). School desegregation, the politics of culture, and the council of independent black institutions. In M.J. Shujaa (Ed.), *Beyond desegregation: The politics of quality in African American schooling* (pp. 253–68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Skiba, R.J., Peterson, R.L., & Williams, T. (1997). Office referrals and suspension: Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Journal of Treatment of Children* 20(3), 295–315.
- Slee, R., Weiner, G., & Tomlinson, S. (1998). *School effectiveness for whom?: Challenges to the school effectiveness and school improvement movements*. London: Falmer.
- Smyth, J., & Shacklock, G. (1998). *Re-making teaching: Ideology, policy, and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- STAR (Support for Texas Academic Renewal) Center. (1997). *Successful Texas schoolwide programs: Research study results*. Retrieved from the Charles A. Dana

- Center Web site: <http://www.starcenter.org/products/resources/nationalawards/research.html>
- Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. (1995). *Transformations: Migration, family life, and achievement among Latino adolescents*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (1996). *The development of accountability systems nationwide and in Texas*. Austin, TX: Author.
- . (2000a). *Academic Excellence Indicator System: 1999–2000 state performance report*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2000/state.html>
- . (2000b). *Federal court upholds legality of TAAS graduation requirement*. Press release. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/press/pr000107a.html>
- . (2000c). *Number of Advanced Placement exams taken by Texas students increases dramatically*. Press Release. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/press/pr000823.html>
- . (2000d). *An overview of the Academic Excellence Indicator System for the State of Texas*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/about.aeis.html>
- . (2000e). *Selected state AEIS data seven year history*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/hist/state.html>
- Trueba, H.T. (1989). Rethinking dropouts: Culture and literacy for minority empowerment. In H.T.Trueba, G.Spindler, & L.Spindler (Eds.). *What do anthropologists have to say about dropouts?* London: Falmer.
- . (1991). From failure to success: The roles of culture and cultural conflict in the academic achievement of Chicano students. In R.R.Valencia (Ed.). *Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s* (pp. 151–63). London: Falmer.
- . (1999). *Latinos unidos: From cultural diversity to the politics of solidarity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Valdés, G. (1998). The world outside and inside schools: Language and immigrant children. *Educational Researcher* 27(6), 4–18.
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Viadero, D. (1999). Setting the bar: How high? *Education Week* 18(17), 21–26.



# CHAPTER 6

## Response to Skrla et al. The Illusion of Educational Equity in Texas

*A Commentary on “Accountability for Equity”*

WALT HANEY

I have read with interest “Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice?” by Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck ([chapter 5](#)). Essentially, these authors argue that the high stakes testing system in Texas by which schools and districts are held “accountable” for student test results, not just overall but disaggregated by ethnic group, has contributed to social justice in terms of reducing the gaps in educational achievement between White and minority children in Texas schools. They discuss “accountability at the state level” and also “improvement at the school district level.” They conclude: “We have presented our arguments and evidence that accountability can, in particular configurations and in certain uses, leverage social justice.”

As someone who has studied and written about education reform in Texas for several years (Haney, 2000, 2001) I should acknowledge at the outset my view that the widely touted “miracle” of educational reform in Texas is at best a myth and illusion. While I cannot in only a few pages summarize all of the evidence leading me to this view, given this background knowledge of what has been happening in Texas schools over the last several decades, it seems to me that the increased educational equity in Texas cited by Skrla and her colleagues is illusory. When authors fail to get their basic facts correct, it tends to weaken trust in the theory erected on such a faulty foundation. If educational equity has not improved in Texas, test-based accountability obviously could not have caused this non-improvement. Indeed, despite the illusions of progress seen by these authors, considerable evidence indicates that the quality of education in Texas has deteriorated over the last decade or two.

The main evidence cited by Skrla and her colleagues of dramatic improvements in educational achievement in Texas generally, and in the four districts they studied, are results from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Since its introduction in 1990–91, the TAAS has been the linchpin of educational accountability in Texas, not just for students, but also for educators and schools. Students have to pass the Grade 10 or “exit level” version of TAAS in order to graduate from high school, and schools are rated as “exemplary,” “recognized,” “acceptable” or “unacceptable” based on a set of “academic excellence indicators,” including TAAS results, drop-out rates, and student attendance rates (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 1997, p. 159).

In their Table 1, Skrla and colleagues report that the statewide passing rate on TAAS increased from 55.6% in 1994 to 79.9% in 2000. Although the pass rate for White students increased from 69.4% to 89.3%, the pass rate for minority students increased even more dramatically, from 33.3% in 1994 to 68.0% in 2000 for African-American students; and from 31.1% to 71.8% for Hispanic students. So the “race gap” in passing rates on TAAS appears to have shrunk in a period of just 6 years.

Readers with even a mild dose of curiosity for details will be left scratching their heads over this table, however, for the authors provide only percentage pass rates on TAAS with no explanation as to grade levels tested, much less numbers of students tested. I suspect these data refer to overall pass rates for Grades 3–8 and Grade 10, because those are the grades tested with TAAS. My own view is that such an aggregation of pass rates across grades obscures as much as it reveals. The authors assert that in the Texas accountability system “students are tested on a stable, criterion referenced test (thus providing a fixed target that is the same for all students...)” It seems to me that this assertion is simply not accurate.

From 1993 until 1999 the passing score on TAAS tests was set at approximately 70% correct. However, a memo from Texas Commissioner of Education Jim Nelson, dated October 25, 1999–2000, reports that passing scores on recent TAAS administrations have been lowered. In the five administrations between Autumn 1999 and Autumn 2000, the passing scores on the TAAS exit-level reading test varied from 27 to 31 out of 48 correct, and on the TAAS mathematics from 30 to 39 out of 60 correct. On the Autumn 2000 exit-level TAAS mathematics test, the passing score was set at 30 out of 60 items correct, or 50%—dramatically lower than the roughly 70% correct that was the passing score until 1999. Nelson sought to explain this lowering of the TAAS passing scores by saying that the 1998–1999 school year was the first year in which items aligned with a new state curriculum “were incorporated into the test” (Nelson, 1999/2000, p. 1). Nelson went on to explain: “I want to be very clear that this year’s raw scores will be lower than last year’s due to the rigor of the test. That is normal and does not affect the validity of the test. These scores will be equated for difficulty in the same manner used since 1994” (Nelson, 1999/2000, p. 1).

Without having access to technical details on recent changes in TAAS content, I am a bit unsure of what to conclude about these developments. In effect Nelson is saying that beginning in Autumn 1999 the TAAS passing scores were lowered in terms of raw scores because more difficult items were included. But at a minimum, Nelson’s memo makes several things clear. First is that someone in the Texas Education Agency does not understand the basics of test equating. Formally speaking, a zero-order requirement for equating two tests is that they be content equivalent (Mislevy, 1992). Second is that the logic of Nelson’s argument in 1999/2000 is directly contrary to what the TEA did when the TAAS was introduced in the early 1990s. The passing score on the state test

preceding TAAS had been set at 70% correct and that was one of the dubious reasons cited for setting the passing score on the more difficult TAAS at 70% correct. There was no effort to lower the passing score on TAAS to make it “equivalent” to the passing score on the earlier test (see Haney, 2000) for a more detailed discussion of the manner in which passing scores on the TAAS were set). In light of this history, one cannot help but wonder what motivations other than those mentioned by Nelson prompted the lowering of TAAS passing scores in 1999 and 2000.

But even if we accept Nelson’s explanation at face value, namely that the passing scores on TAAS in 1999 and 2000 were lowered because new content was introduced to the test, clearly this means that TAAS has not been a “stable, criterion referenced test...providing a fixed target” as Skrla and her colleagues (2001) would have readers believe.

There is far more that I could say about the Skrla and colleagues’ “Accountability for Equity” paper. However, to avoid getting sidetracked on relatively minor issues, let me focus on what seem to be the two major propositions undergirding their whole argument, namely that there has been substantial progress in reducing racial gaps in achievement in Texas statewide and in the four districts studied by these authors and their colleagues.

### **A Miracle of Educational Progress in Texas?**

As mentioned, I have studied a wide variety of evidence concerning education in Texas, first as an expert witness in the case of *GI Forum v. Texas Education Agency* (brought against the state of Texas by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund), then in preparation for a lengthy scholarly article (Haney, 2000), and finally in preparing a summary and update of that article (Haney, 2001) for a conference on dropouts sponsored by the Harvard Civil Rights Project.

In this short commentary, there is no way I can summarize all of the evidence leading me to the conclusion that the Texas “miracle” is, at best, myth and illusion, and at worst, outright fraud. Hence, let me simply recount two key pieces of evidence, relating to the rates at which students in Texas are being failed to repeat Grade 9, and the increased numbers of students who are leaving school in Texas prior to high-school graduation.

When I first started studying education in Texas more than 2 years ago, it quickly became apparent that the official statistics on drop-outs reported by the TEA were highly misleading (see Haney, 2000, 2001, for a full explanation of why I became suspicious of the TEA drop-out statistics). Hence, I decided to study data on grade enrollments and graduates in Texas. Thanks to help from a number of generous people, I was able to assemble a set of data on the numbers of students enrolled by grade in Texas, and the numbers of high-school graduates from 1975–1976 to 1998–1999. Using these data I was able to analyze rates of

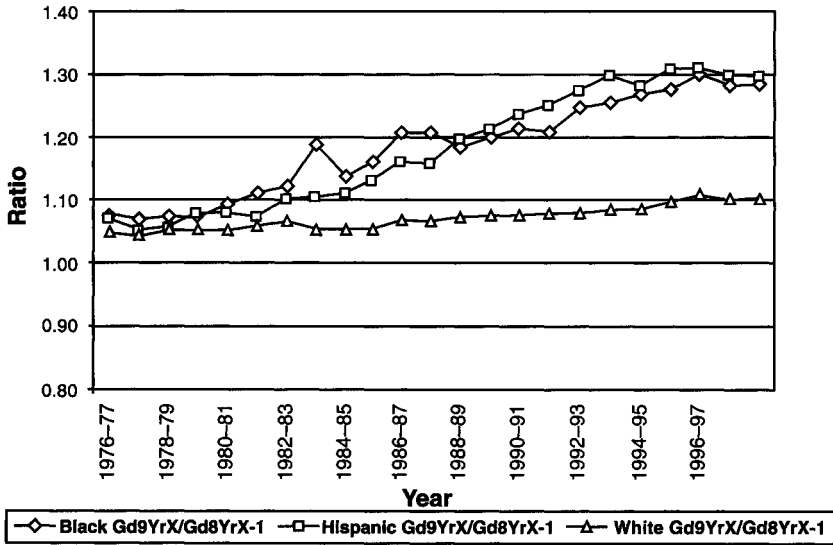


Fig. 6.1 Progression Ratios for Texas Grade 8 to 9 by Ethnic Group 1977–1999

progression from grade to grade and from various grades to graduation. I summarize just two such analyses here.

In analyzing enrollment data for Texas over the last 25 years, one of the most striking patterns I found related to rates of progression from Grade 8 to Grade 9. Specifically, I had calculated and graphed the numbers of students in Grade 9 in each academic year divided by the numbers of students in Grade 8 the previous year, with the results shown in Figure 6.1. The reason why these Grade 8 to 9 progression ratios are greater than 1 is because some students are failed in Grade 9 and have to repeat the grade. As can be seen from Figure 6.1, in the late 1970s the progression ratios for Black, Hispanic, and White students in Texas were similar: less than 1.10, implying that less than 10% of Grade 9 students were flunked to repeat Grade 9. Since then, however, the progression ratios for minority and White students have diverged sharply. By 1998–1999, the Grade 8 to 9 progression ratio for Whites had increased only slightly to about 1.10. However, for Black and Hispanic students in Texas the ratio had increased to about 1.30, evidence that 25–30% of Black and Hispanic students were being flunked to repeat Grade 9. (Available evidence indicates that the vast majority of students who are failed to repeat Grade 9 do not persist in school to high-school graduation.) So my question to Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck is this: If there has been increasing equity in educational achievement in Texas, how is it possible that the Grade 9 failure for Black and Hispanic students in Texas has increased from being roughly equivalent to the rate for Whites in the late 1970s, to being triple the rate for Whites by the late 1990s?

In another series of analyses, I sought to study the rates at which students in Texas graduated from high school. In one set of analyses, I calculated progress from Grade 6 to high-school graduation 6.5 years later for the Texas high-school classes of 1982–1999 simply in terms of numbers of students (that is, total numbers of Black, Hispanic, and White students).

These results are shown in [Figure 6.2](#), and also shown are the differences, that is the numbers of students who do not make it from Grade 6 to high school graduation 6.5 years later. As can be seen, the numbers of children lost between Grade 6 and high school graduation in Texas were in the range of 50,000–60,000 for the classes of 1982–1986. The numbers of lost children started to increase for the classes of 1986 and 1987 and jumped to almost 90,000 for the class of 1991. For the classes of 1992–99, in the range of 75,000 to 80,000 children are being lost in each cohort.

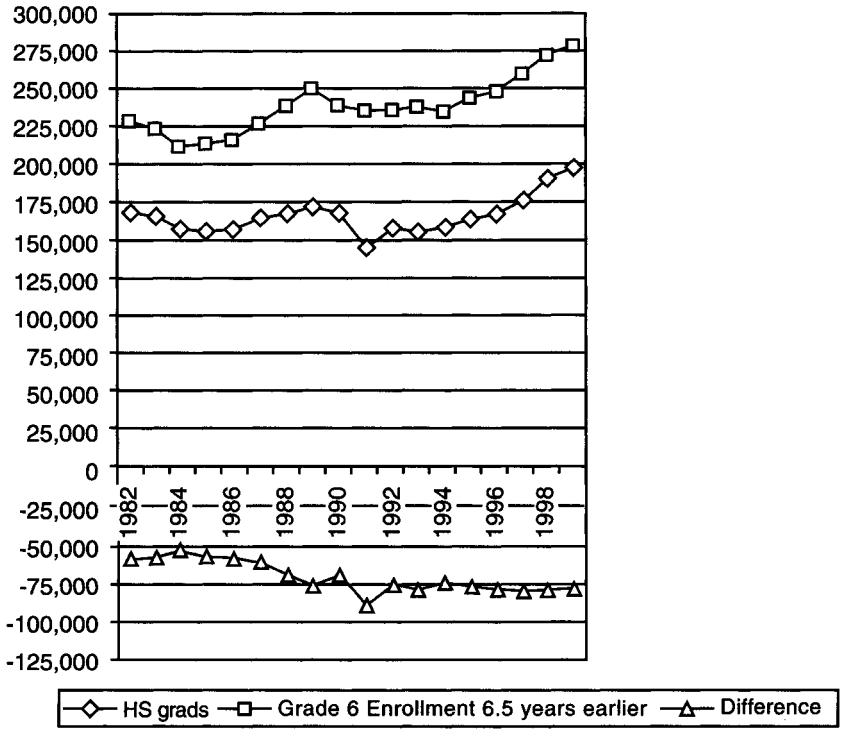
Cumulatively for the classes of 1991 through 1999, there were a total of 2,226,003 White, Black, and Hispanic students enrolled in Grade 6 (in the academic years 1984–85 to 1992–93). The total number graduating from these classes was 1,510,274. In other words, for the graduating classes of 1991–99, 715, 729 children in Texas (or 32%) were lost or left behind before graduation from high school.<sup>1</sup> Independent analyses by Balfanz and Letgers (2001) confirm that there are large numbers of high schools in Texas with very low “holding power.” So my next question to Skrla and her colleagues is this: If equity in Texas education has been improving, why have the numbers of students lost between Grade 6 and high-school graduation increased so sharply between the 1980s and the 1990s?

### **Progress in Four Texas Districts?**

In “Accountability for Equity,” Skrla and colleagues claim that educational equity has improved in Texas not just statewide but also in four districts they and colleagues have studied. As summarized above, my view is that the apparent improvements in educational achievement in Texas statewide are in some measure an illusion based on increased rates of failure of students in Grade 9 and increased numbers of students leaving school before high-school graduation. Nonetheless, Texas is a large state: according to the 2000 Census, now surpassing New York as the second largest state in the nation. So it is certainly conceivable that even if education statewide has not improved, it may have improved in specific districts.

And this is what Skrla and colleagues (2001) claim to have happened in the four districts they studied. “All the districts studied have shown distinctive success in closing the performance gap that historically has existed between the performance of White students and students of color.” Of the four districts mentioned, the largest is the Aldine Independent School District located in the metropolitan Houston area, and serving close to 50,000 students in 56 schools. As evidence that this district has achieved “more equitable and higher success for all





**Fig. 6.2** Progress from Grade 6 to High-School Graduation, Texas Classes of 1982–1999 groups of children” (p. 252), Skrla and colleagues cite results on both TAAS tests and algebra “end-of-course” exams.

As it happens, I have recently studied the high-school graduation rate in the 100 largest school districts in the nation (Haney, 2001), among which is Aldine (see Table 6.1). In 1994–95 there were 11,028 students enrolled in Grades 7 to 9 in Aldine, or on average 3, 676 in each of these grades. Three years later, that is in 1997–98, there were 1986 high school graduates in Aldine. Dividing the latter by the former yields a high-school graduation rate of 54%.

This is not the worst high-school graduation rate among large districts in Texas. Over the same interval, Austin, Fort Worth, Dallas, and Houston had even worse graduation rates. However, it is hard to fathom how a district with a high-school graduation rate of only 54% could conceivably be described as having achieved “more equitable and higher success for all groups of children.”

**Conclusion**

Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck (2001) claim that the Texas system of accountability has increased equity in educational achievement in Texas statewide and in the four districts they studied.

**Table 6.1.** High School Graduates 1997–1998 as Percentage of Average Enrollment Grades 7 to 9, 1994–1995, in the 100 Largest School Districts

<b>Name of reporting district</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Enrollment 1994–'95 Grades 7 to 9</b>	<b>Number of 1997–'98 Graduates</b>	<b>Grads '97–'98 as % of Gds 7–9 Enrol. '94–'95/3</b>
1 Montgomery Country Public Schools	MD	24505	7413	90.75%
2 Fairfax County Public Schools	VA	30452	9087	89.52%
3 Davis School District	UT	14060	4177	89.13%
4 Jordan School District	UT	17018	4742	83.59%
5 Chesterfield County Public Schools	VA	11322	3110	82.41%
6 Prince Georges County Public Schools	MD	27043	7287	80.84%
7 Baltimore County Public Schools	MD	22309	5984	80.47%
8 Alpine School District	UT	10787	2863	79.62%
9 Prince William County Public School	VA	10678	2822	79.28%
10 San Francisco Unified	CA	14133	3708	78.71%
11 Northside Independent School District	TX	13693	3549	77.76%
12 San Juan Unified	CA	11124	2875	77.54%
13 Wake County Schools	NC	17220	4388	76.45%
14 Gwinnett County School District	GA	18847	4775	76.01%
15 Ysleta Independent School District	TX	11300	2860	75.93%
16 Garden Grove Unified	CA	9387	2373	75.84%
17 Cobb County School District	GA	18997	4796	75.74%
18 Jefferson (KY) County	KY	20171	5080	75.55%
19 Seattle	WA	9716	2445	75.49%
20 Granite School District	UT	19153	4801	75.20%
21 Cypress—Fairbanks ISD	TX	11595	2883	74.59%
22 Boston School District	MA	13122	3246	74.21%
23 North East Independent School District	TX	10746	2631	73.45%
24 Fort Bend Independent School District	TX	11171	2722	73.10%
25 Jefferson (CO) County R—1	CO	20171	4879	72.56%
26 Hawaii Department of Education	HI	43021	10369	72.31%
27 Mesa Unified School District	AZ	14985	3592	71.91%
28 Washoe County School District	NV	9983	2391	71.85%
29 Fulton County School District	GA	12009	2844	71.05%
30 Nashville—Davidson County SD	TN	16909	4004	71.04%
31 Long Beach Unified	CA	16685	3916	70.41%
32 Anne Arundel County Public Schools	MD	16921	3943	69.91%
33 Knox County School District	TN	11998	2781	69.54%

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed and President Clinton signed into law Goals 2000 legislation which set out as a national educational goal that, by the year 2000, 90% of students would graduate from high school. Available evidence indicates that in the late 1990s less than 70% of students in Texas were graduating from high school. Data from the Aldine Independent School District show that less than 60% of students in this large district were graduating.

The facts discussed above cast considerable doubt on whether educational equity has increased in schools in Texas. School systems in which a third or

<b>Name of reporting district</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Enrollment 1994-'95 Grades 7 to 9</b>	<b>Number of 1997-'98 Graduates</b>	<b>Grads '97-'98 as % of Gds 7-9 Enrol. '94-'95/3</b>
34 Clark County School District	NV	35259	8165	69.47%
35 Greenville County School District	SC	13453	3110	69.35%
36 Virginia Beach City Public Schools	VA	18173	4151	68.52%
37 Arlington Independent School District	TX	11437	2607	68.38%
38 Shelby County School District	TN	10508	2385	68.09%
39 Guilford County Schools	NC	13039	2934	67.51%
40 Lee County School District	FL	11881	2671	67.44%
41 Charlotte—Mecklenburg Schools	NC	19254	4298	66.97%
42 Seminole County School District	FL	13251	2950	66.79%
43 Albuquerque Public Schools	NM	21494	4771	66.59%
44 Cumberland County Schools	NC	10665	2367	66.58%
45 Escambia County School District	FL	10083	2229	66.32%
46 Memphis City School District	TN	26084	5736	65.97%
47 Anchorage School District	AK	10630	2296	64.80%
48 El Paso Independent School District	TX	15833	3387	64.18%
49 Broward County School District	FL	45143	9637	64.04%
50 De Kalb County School District	GA	20601	4374	63.70%
51 Orange County School District	FL	27516	5840	63.67%
52 Brevard County School District	FL	15419	3259	63.41%
53 Mobile County School District	AL	16348	3451	63.33%
54 San Diego City Unified	CA	28116	5928	63.25%
55 Volusia County School District	FL	13578	2769	61.18%
56 Portland School District IJ	OR	11906	2427	61.15%
57 East Baton Rouge Parish School Board	LA	14169	2858	60.51%
58 Puerto Rico Dept of Education	PR	149907	29891	59.82%
59 Wichita	KS	10727	2137	59.77%
60 Palm Beach County School District	FL	30927	6112	59.29%
61 Garland Independent School District	TX	10006	1973	59.15%
62 Sacramento City Unified	CA	10982	2162	59.06%
63 Tuscon Unified District	AZ	14489	2843	58.87%
64 Denver County	CO	13430	2627	58.68%
65 Polk County School District	FL	17564	3430	58.59%
66 Dade County School District	FL	73829	14401	58.52%
67 District of Columbia Public Schools	DC	15198	2905	57.34%

*Continued*

more of students fail even to graduate from high school (thus falling woefully short of the national educational goal of 90% high school graduation rate) are, it seems to me, models more of inequity than of equity. Moreover, even for students who do graduate from high school in Texas, several kinds of evidence (college admissions test scores, college “readiness” test scores, and testimony of University of Texas officials), indicate that, for those seeking to go on to higher education, their academic preparation deteriorated during the 1990s (see Haney, 2001, for a discussion of this evidence).

<b>Name of reporting district</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Enrollment 1994-'95 Grades 7 to 9</b>	<b>Number of 1997-'98 Graduates</b>	<b>Grads '97-'98 as % of Gds 7-9 Enrol. '94-'95/3</b>
68 Los Angeles Unified	CA	136134	25843	56.95%
69 Caddo Parish School Board	LA	12844	2417	56.45%
70 Orleans Parish School Board	LA	19757	3676	55.82%
71 City of Chicago School District 29	IL	89499	16567	55.53%
72 Minneapolis	MN	9799	1810	55.41%
73 Buffalo City School District	NY	9730	1797	55.41%
74 Philadelphia City School District	PA	49172	8991	54.85%
75 Hillsborough County School District	FL	35328	6393	54.29%
76 San Antonio Independent School District	TX	13992	2528	54.20%
77 Aldine Independent School District	TX	11028	1986	54.03%
78 Jefferson Parish School Board	LA	13789	2482	54.00%
79 Austin Independent School District	TX	16985	3042	53.73%
80 Fresno Unified	CA	17960	3180	53.12%
81 Santa Ana Unified	CA	10697	1891	53.03%
82 Detroit City School District	MI	37566	6573	52.49%
83 Duval County School District	FL	27385	4703	51.52%
84 Fort Worth Independent School District	TX	16623	2834	51.15%
85 Pinellas County School District	FL	28460	4744	50.01%
86 Dallas Independent School District	TX	34302	5659	49.49%
87 New York City Public Schools	NY	229507	37851	49.48%
88 San Bernardino City Unified	CA	11133	1778	47.91%
89 Houston Independent School District	TX	47598	7421	46.77%
90 Baltimore City Public School System	MD	27593	4103	44.61%
91 Milwaukee School District	WI	21949	3247	44.38%
92 Columbus City School District	OH	15285	2207	43.32%
93 Atlanta City School District	GA	14584	2087	42.93%
94 Oakland Unified	CA	11581	1633	42.30%
95 Cleveland City School District	OH	17859	1581	26.56%
96 Cincinnati City School District	OH	12520	1096	26.26%

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the USA: 1995-96 NCES 98-214 by Beth Aronstamm Young. Washington D.C. 1998. Appendix G.U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics. Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 1998-99 NCES 2000-345 by Beth Aronstamm Young. Washington DC: 2000. Table 3.

### Notes

1. This analysis does not take immigration into account. However, as explained in Haney (2001), given that there has been a net migration into Texas in the last decade or more, such cohort progression analyses likely underestimate the extent of the problem of non-graduation in Texas.

## References

- Balfanz, R., & Letgers, N. (2001, January). *How many central city high schools have a severe drop-out problem, -where are they located, and who attends them?* Paper presented at the Drop-out Research: Accurate Counts and Positive Interventions Conference Sponsored by Achieve and the Harvard Civil Rights Project, Cambridge, MA.
- Haney, W. (2000) The myth of the Texas miracle in education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8(41). A printed version of this monograph is distributed by the Harvard Education Publishing Group. Available online at: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41/>
- Haney, W. (2001, January). *Revisiting the myth of the Texas miracle in education: Lessons about drop-out research and drop-out prevention* (Draft v. 5). Revision of paper presented at the Drop-out Research: Accurate Counts and Positive Interventions Conference. Sponsored by Achieve and the Harvard Civil Rights Project, Cambridge MA.
- Mislevy, R.J. (1992). *Linking educational assessments: Concepts, issues, methods and prospects*. Princeton, NJ: ETS Policy Information Center.
- Nelson, J. (1999/2000). *Memo to the administrator addressed*. Texas Education Agency, dated October, 25 1999. (In Autumn 2000, I received two copies of this memo from sources in Texas. Both were dated October 25 1999 on the first page. However, I suspect that this date may be an error because the memo provides documentation on TAAS passing scores for four TAAS administrations in the year 2000. Additional evidence that Nelson's memo was incorrectly dated comes from the footers on each of the five pages of tables attached to the memo. Each is dated October, 12, 2000. That is why I have cited this document as Nelson 1999/2000.)
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J., Johnson, J., & Koschoreck, J. (2001). Accountability for equity: Can state policy leverage social justice? *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 4(3), 237–60.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (1997). *Texas student assessment program technical digest for the academic year 1996–97*. Austin, TX: Author.

# **CHAPTER 7**

## **Response to Skrla et al.**

### *Is There a Connection between Educational Equity and Accountability?*

**STEPHEN P.KLEIN**

Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck (hereinafter referred to as SSJK) suggest that the high stakes educational accountability system in Texas has contributed to improving social justice for minority students in that state by increasing “educational equity.” The following facts about test scores in Texas would seem to support their conclusion.

- The mean scores of minority students on the state reading and math tests (called the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills or TAAS) have shot up since these tests were introduced in 1994 as part of Texas’s high stakes accountability system.
- The gains for minority students on the TAAS have been greater than the gains for White students on these tests.
- Consequently, there has been a substantial narrowing of the gap in scores between Whites and students of color on the TAAS.
- The scores of both White and minority students in Texas on the highly regarded National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests are above the national average.

All the statements above are true. Also they are consistent with SSJK’s thesis that the high stakes testing and accountability program in Texas contributes to educational equity for minority students. However, there are some other indisputable facts about these exams that appear to undermine SSJK’s conclusions.

- The gap in mean scores between Whites and students of color on NAEP actually widened slightly during the same time that they narrowed substantially on the TAAS.
- With the exception of 4th grade mathematics scores, the 4-year score gains of minority students on NAEP were comparable with those observed nationwide. There was nothing remarkable about Texas.
- The mean scores of Black, Hispanic, and White students in Texas were above the national average years before Texas implemented its high-stakes testing

program. Thus, it is illogical to attribute the relatively high scores in Texas to the effects of a testing program that began years later.

### Overview

The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. The first describes some salient features of the TAAS and NAEP exams and summarizes the evidence for the bulleted statements above. The second discusses why the TAAS and NAEP testing programs may have produced such disparate finding, and I conclude by considering the implications of these results.

### A Tale of Two Tests

The TAAS program was implemented statewide in 1994. It focuses mainly on reading and mathematics in Grades 3–8 and 10. Other subjects are also tested, but only at a few grade levels. The TAAS exams are state-developed, multiple-choice tests that are administered annually to students by their classroom teachers. These exams are designed to assess the mandated curriculum in Texas and, since 1994, “high stakes” (rewards and sanctions) have been attached to the results for students, teachers, and schools.

The NAEP exams are based on content standards developed by a national panel of experts; they contain multiple-choice and open-ended questions, and normally they are administered in Grades 4 and 8 on a 4-year cycle by a third party (rather than annually by the classroom teacher). There are no stakes attached to the results. NAEP exams are given to a stratified random sample of students in each of the over 40 states that have chosen to participate in this program, and to a separate national sample. Only national and statewide results are reported.

If the accountability system Texas put in place in the mid 1990s led to real gains in student achievement over time for minority students, then we should see the effects of this program on the students’ TAAS and NAEP scores. In other words, if SSJK are right, then on both tests, the scores for minority students should be increasing and the gap between Whites and students of color should be decreasing.

TAAS and NAEP results for public school children are readily available on the Web sites for the Texas Education Agency and the National Center for Education Statistics, respectively. Analyses of these data reveal the following about the results with these two testing programs (for details, see Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stetcher, 2000).

1. The gaps between Blacks and Whites in average reading and mathematics scores on the TAAS in 1998 were much smaller than they were in 1994. For example, the difference on the 8th-grade mathematics test was cut by about a third. TAAS results further show that the gap between Whites and

- Hispanics in both reading and mathematics were also closing during this same 4-year period.
2. By contrast, over a comparable 4-year period there was no decrease in gap size between Blacks and Whites or between Hispanics and Whites on the NAEP 4th-grade reading test, 4th-grade mathematics test, or 8th grade mathematics test (4-year gain could not be computed for 8th grade NAEP reading).
  3. TAAS scores have been shooting up for all groups, but especially for students of color. For example, the mean scale score for Black 8th graders in 1998 was about 0.75 standard deviation units higher than it was in 1994. The Hispanic mean increased by about 0.70 units. Scores for Whites also went up, but not nearly as much (only about 0.45 units, but this is still an enormous improvement in just 4 years). However, for all 3 groups, their improvement on NAEP during a comparable 4-year period was only about 0.12 units. Thus, the gains for minority students on TAAS were as much as six times greater than they were on NAEP. The small improvements on NAEP in Texas were comparable with the improvements nationally. With the exception of the 4th-grade mathematics scores that are discussed below, there was nothing remarkable about the NAEP score gains in Texas for any group.
  4. The average NAEP scores of Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites in Texas are generally higher than they are in other states. This has been true since NAEP began reporting results by state in 1990 (which is well before the implementation of the TAAS program in 1994). Thus, the higher than average scores in Texas are not due to its new accountability system. For example, Black 4th graders in 1992 had a mean NAEP mathematics scale score of 199. This mean was 7 points higher than the national average for Blacks. Four years later, the mean NAEP scale score for Black 8th graders was 249; that is, a 50-point improvement between 4th and 8th grades. However, Blacks nationally also improved by 50 points, so the gain in Texas was the same as it was nationwide. The same was true for Hispanics and Whites, and for reading as well as for mathematics.

The one NAEP finding that differs from the general trends described above was that between 1992 and 1996 the 4th-grade mathematics scores improved far more in Texas than they did nationally. Although this was true for all three of the racial/ethnic groups studied, the largest improvements by far were for Whites. Nevertheless, the improvements in TAAS scores for Blacks and Hispanics continued to far outstrip their improvement on NAEP.

To sum up, average NAEP scores in Texas are higher than they are nationally. However, these scores were well above average long before the implementation of the statewide accountability system. Moreover, with the exception of 4th-grade mathematics scores for Whites, there was nothing remarkable about the size of the gain in NAEP scores in Texas since the inception of its statewide



TAAS program in 1994. Thus, the NAEP data are not consistent with the thesis that the accountability system in Texas has helped to close the gap in reading and math skills between Whites and students of color.

The TAAS data tell a very different story. They show that scores are dramatically skyrocketing upwards for all groups, but especially for students of color. Were it not for the NAEP results, these score gains would support SSJK's thesis that the Texas accountability system is contributing to social justice.

### **Why Do NAEP and TAAS Scores Tell Such Different Stories?**

Several hypotheses have been suggested to explain the huge disparity between the score gains on NAEP versus TAAS, but none of them supports SSJK's thesis. One explanation is that the TAAS tests measure quite different aspects of reading and mathematics than are assessed by the NAEP exams. It is certainly true that the TAAS tests are based on curriculum standards for Texas whereas the NAEP exams are based on national standards. However, suggesting that this is the source of the disparity in results between these tests implies that the skills and abilities that are needed to read and do mathematics in Texas are qualitatively quite different from those that are needed in the rest of the country. We doubt that most Texans would agree with this thesis. Indeed, the Education Plan that President Bush issued on January 23, 2001, calls for using NAEP to check the validity of gains on each state's own exam, which is exactly what Klein and colleagues (2000) did.

It is possible that the TAAS scores have shot up as a result of curriculum and instruction in Texas being focused on just what is tested on the TAAS. If so, then other important aspects of reading and mathematics may be ignored as well as other skills and subjects (such as science). In other words, the TAAS gains may have been achieved at the price of narrowing the curriculum within and/or across subjects.

Concerns have been raised that the high stakes on the TAAS (and the setting of what some consider to be unrealistically high expectations and goals for score improvements) may have led to inappropriate coaching or worse. There also may be a problem with the tests themselves. Specifically, it appears that the TAAS is too easy for many students. If so, it would artificially narrow the gap in average scores between White and minority students (because with tests that include questions across a broad spectrum of difficulty, Whites tend to have higher scores than do students of color). There is not an unduly low ceiling on NAEP. Another explanation that has been offered for the huge disparity between NAEP and TAAS results is that students may try harder on the TAAS than on NAEP. However, if students do try harder on the TAAS, that has likely been the case for some time. Hence, it would not bias comparisons of score gains between these tests.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Whether there has been an improvement in educational equity in Texas cannot be determined by examining whether the gaps in average scores between groups are closing on the state-developed, teacher-administered TAAS or by assessing whether NAEP scores in Texas are higher than they are elsewhere. Instead, the two questions that need to be answered are:

1. Has there been a better than average improvement in NAEP scores in Texas since the inception of that state's high-stakes accountability system?
2. Is the gap closing between Whites and students of color on NAEP?

Unfortunately for SSJK's thesis, the answer is "no" to both questions. With the exception of 4th-grade mathematics, the gains on NAEP in Texas were comparable with those observed nationwide. Also, there is no indication that the gaps on NAEP were closing. In fact, they were widening slightly (Klein et al., 2000).

Given these findings, what do we need to know to better understand the relationship between educational equity and accountability? One place to start is to find out why NAEP and TAAS scores tell such radically different stories about whether the gap between racial/ethnic groups is closing or not. We also need to understand why NAEP scores were so high in Texas even before the full implementation of its accountability system, and why NAEP scores have not improved in Texas relative to the nation after Texas implemented that system (and why 4th-grade mathematics test results differed from the other tests and particularly for Whites). We need to know about other outcomes as well, such as whether there has been any change in the percentage of minority 9th graders who eventually graduate from high school, or in the percentage of students who are held out of the NAEP and TAAS programs. We need to understand what happens in the classroom when there is so much emphasis on doing well on a statewide test. In short, we need the answers to these and a whole host of other questions before we can say there is a positive or negative connection between educational equity and accountability (if indeed one exists).

At least in theory, high-stakes tests can be a valuable policy lever for effecting important educational reforms, including improving social equity. Such tests certainly influence what is taught, and thereby the skills and knowledge that students acquire. However, whether these exams and the stakes attached to them contribute to actual (as distinct from superficial) improvements in student achievement and educational equity will depend heavily on the quality of the tests employed (in terms of the breadth and depth of the knowledge, skills, and abilities they measure), how they are administered and scored, and how the results on them are reported and used in the decision-making process.

The trust we place in other high-stakes exams, such as for college admissions and for making licensing decisions for doctors and lawyers, stems in part from

these exams being developed and controlled by a reputable independent party that does not have an interest in whether the examinees receive high or low scores. Similarly, if we want to use the scores on statewide tests for making important decisions about individual students, teachers, and schools; then these tests also must satisfy the same high standards for validity, reliability, fairness, and test security as we impose on other high-stakes exams. It is evident from the apparent score inflation on the TAAS, and the unhappy experiences with high-stakes exams in other states (Koretz, Linn, Dunbar, & Shepard, 1991; Linn, 2000), that nothing less will do (see Bennett, 1998, and Hamilton, Klein, & Lorrie, 2000, for a discussion of how this could be done in a cost-effective and professionally responsible way).

### References

- Bennett, R. (1998). *Reinventing assessment* Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Hamilton, L., Klein, S., & Lorrie, W. (2000). *Using web-based testing for large-scale assessment* (IP-196-EDU). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Klein, S., Hamilton, L., McCaffrey, D., & Stecher, B. (2000) *What do test scores in Texas tell us?* (IP-202). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Koretz, D., Linn, R.L., Dunbar, S.B., & Shepard, L.A. (1991, April). *The effects of high stakes testing: Preliminary evidence about generalization across test*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education, Chicago, IL.
- Linn, R. (2000). Assessments and accountability. *Educational Researcher* 29(2), 4–16.

# **CHAPTER 8**

## **Complex and Contested Constructions of Accountability and Educational Equity**

**LINDA SKRLA, JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH, JOSEPH  
F. JOHNSON, JR., AND JAMES W. KOSCHORECK**

We very much appreciate Walt Haney’s and Stephen Klein’s willingness to engage with us in dialogue about accountability and educational equity, issues about which we clearly all care deeply. Both of their responses to “Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice,” (chapter 5) provide scholarly and substantive critique of our work and raise important questions. As we said in that piece, we strongly believe that careful consideration, from many viewpoints, of the intensely complex and often highly emotionally charged issues surrounding accountability policy and its equity effects is sorely needed. We also strongly believe that the implications of this discussion are critically important to the future of children of color and children from low-income families. We are, thus, grateful to Professors Haney and Klein for responding to our work, and we are pleased to have the opportunity to offer a rejoinder to their critiques. We do so in three major sections. First, we discuss areas of agreement, or shared constructions of meaning, between our views and those of our critics. Next, we discuss issues of disagreement, or contested constructions, between our views of accountability and educational equity and those of Haney and Klein. We end with a brief conclusions section.

### **Convergent Constructions**

Both Haney and Klein raise a number of issues about the evidence that we use in “Accountability for Equity” to support our position that state accountability can, in some configurations and in certain circumstances, promote, support, and actually leverage increased educational equity in U.S. public schools. Klein and Haney are both particularly concerned about our use of Texas student achievement data, specifically the improving Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) performance for all student groups and the narrowing of performance gaps between groups from 1994 to 2000, as evidence of increasing educational equity in Texas. Klein’s primary issue with our use of TAAS scores as evidence of improved equity is that a study he conducted on National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) performance of Texas students in reading and math did not show the same narrowing of achievement gaps between the performance of White students and that of students of color that has been

seen on the TAAS results. Klein uses these findings as evidence that the gains on TAAS are “not real” or represent only “superficial” levels of learning. Haney, similarly, raises issues about what the improvements in TAAS performance represent and what the narrowed gaps between students of color and White students on the TAAS mean. Specifically, Haney questions whether changes in passing scores in 1999 and 2000 artificially inflated achievement gains, and he argues that rising retention rates and declining graduation rates for African-American and Latina/o students in Texas demonstrate that educational equity in Texas is diminishing rather than increasing.

These issues that Klein and Haney raise are unquestionably important, and we agree with many of the points that they offered in support of their positions. For example, as we stated repeatedly in “Accountability for Equity,” we do not think that improvement in TAAS performance, by itself, represents the level of achievement or the level of educational equity that we would want for any Texas child. In fact, we described TAAS improvements as moving out of a very dismal basement and only onto an adequate main floor, and we clearly stated that, in our view, there are many floors above the main one that have not yet been reached by children of color in Texas public schools. Therefore, like Klein, we want and hope to see evidence of increases in achievement and narrowing of historic gaps between groups on other standard measures of achievement, such as NAEP. If educational equity is to become a reality in Texas and across the United States, achievement must increase and gaps must close across a *wide* range of measures that we as a society use and value to assess educational achievement, including scores on college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT, percentages taking and passing Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams, enrollment in college preparatory high school curricula, attainment of college degrees, and so forth.

Similarly, we completely agree with Haney that the drop-out rate in Texas, particularly the rate for children of color, is unacceptably high. In fact, it is criminally high; it is a crime against U.S. ideals of democracy that the failure of children of color to complete high school in huge numbers and percentages is accepted as the normal situation in Texas and in other states. We see the high drop-out rates for children of color as in arguable evidence of systemic racism in Texas public schools and in schools in other states, the direct heritage of slavery, anti-immigrant prejudice, and hugely inadequately funded, segregated schooling, among other causes.

### **Contested Constructions**

Though we agree with Haney and Klein on many of the issues they raise in their responses and appreciate their focus on these issues in the discussion, their responses share a characteristic that we find to be highly problematic. This problem is their seeming insistence on discussing accountability and its equity effects in polarized, adversarial terms and on representing their own research

findings as if there is some singular, monolithic truth about these issues that can be drawn from each one's individual research. In fact, after reading Klein's and Haney's responses for the first time, we actually had to go back and re-read our original piece to reassure ourselves that our call for careful thinking and resistance to monological, totalized positions was still in there, since there was virtually no acknowledgement in Haney's and Klein's responses of our validation of and emphasis on the critical need for multiple viewpoints.

Accountability and educational equity are intensely complicated and complex issues, and we need careful, balanced dialogue about them that avoids a polarized "right" versus "wrong." In fact, we would suggest that we all need to consider carefully the very language in which we conduct this debate. Haney's terminology ("myths," "illusions," "miracles," etc.) seems unnecessarily combative and derogatory. The reason that it is so terribly important that we pay careful attention to the language we use to discuss the connections between accountability and educational equity is because what is at stake here is not simply who comes out on top in an academic debate. The educational experiences of more than 17 million children of color in U.S. public schools, their futures, and their very lives are what is at stake in this discussion. If accountability policy has the force and potential to alter a decades-long path of racism, mistreatment, and under-education of children of color in our schools, we cannot afford not to clearly recognize that there is contradictory research on virtually all of the key issues and that no large policy like accountability works perfectly in every context on every relevant variable. Haney and Klein do not seem—to us—to understand that thoughtful dialogue that respects and appreciates, while probing critically, different and conflicting views is what is needed to move forward the conversation about and understanding of accountability and educational equity, as both of them persist in presenting their points as if their individual research should end all discussion rather than be but one contribution among many to a broader conversation.

For example, in his response to "Accountability for Equity," Klein poses two questions, "(1) Has there been a better than average improvement in NAEP scores in Texas since the inception of the state's high stakes accountability system? (2) Is the gap closing between Whites and students of color on NAEP?" He then says that "the answer to both questions is a resounding 'NO.'" What Klein fails to mention is that there is definitely no agreement in the national research community that the answers to these questions are "no." In fact, another group of researchers at RAND, using a statistical methodology different from Klein's to study results from seven NAEP math and reading tests given between 1990 and 1996, reached almost completely opposite conclusions than he did about whether or not the gains in TAAS were reflected in NAEP gains for Texas students, while identifying Texas as one of two states making the *greatest* gains on NAEP during this period (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000, p. 59). Clearly, the connections and relationships between TAAS achievement and NAEP achievement for Texas students are contested terrain.

Klein also states that TAAS was implemented in 1994 and argues that high Texas NAEP scores for students of color that began in 1990 could not have been influenced by “a testing program that began four years later.” This is not accurate. TAAS was given for the first time in 1990–91, and it was preceded by two earlier generation tests, the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABs) and the Texas Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS). In addition, all three of these tests have been embedded in a wide-ranging array of policy reforms that began in the late 1970s and have substantially changed all aspects of the educational system in Texas. A list of a just a few examples of reform policies that have been enacted since 1979 includes:

- 1979 Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABs)
- 1984 Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS)
- 1984 Statewide Curriculum Standards (Essential Elements)
- 1984 Increased Graduation Requirements
- 1984 Exit Level Test for Graduation
- 1984 No Pass No Play
- 1984 Limit on Student Absences
- 1985 Funding for Pre-Kindergarten for Children from Low-income Homes and Children with Limited English Proficiency
- 1990 Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)
- 1991 Increased Span of Compulsory Attendance from Ages 7–16 to 6–17
- 1993 Student Performance First Used to Determine District Accreditation Status
- 1995 End of Course Testing in Algebra and Biology
- 1995 Rewrite of Entire Texas Education Code
- 1998 2nd Generation Curriculum Standards: Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills
- 1999 Special Education and Spanish TAAS Test Takers Counted in Accountability

These reform policies, and the many, many others that are not listed here, have influenced, in complex and complicated ways, the education process and achievement results (including both TAAS and NAEP) in Texas schools. Consequently, separating out which policy has caused which results within this very complex system of state policies is nowhere near as simple as Klein suggests.

Like the above examples taken from Klein’s response, Haney’s thesis that increases in TAAS scores have come at the expense of children of color who have been pushed out of the system through 9th-grade retention and drop-outs is also more contested than it would appear from the way he represents it. As we stated above, we agree that the drop-out rate for Texas children of color is completely unacceptable and, even, criminal—a critical civil rights issue. Also, from Haney’s data, it appears that retention in 9th grade for students of color is

increasing at a much faster rate than it is for White students. This is a serious and damaging problem. However, to take the reductionist position that TAAS (or any other single state policy measure) is the sole cause of either the drop-out rate or the 9th-grade retention rate is much too simplistic. The drop-out rate in Texas and other Southern states for children of color has long been obscenely high, and recent studies show that it is not improving in any state. In fact, it is worsening in most states, even in Northern and Midwestern states populated mainly by White middle-class students where drop-out rates have historically been low (Mollison, 2001). Furthermore, Haney's attempts to impute a causal relationship between TAAS and increases in Texas drop-out rates have been disputed by other scholars. Carnoy, Loeb, and Smith (2000), using the same data as Haney, did not find a relationship between implementation of TAAS and increases in drop-out rates in Texas. In addition, they found that urban high schools with the largest gains on TAAS had significant *decreases* in their reported drop-out rates. Nonetheless, even though Haney is well aware of this latter research, he does not mention it in his response.

Another of Haney's points that we wish to problematize is his totally negative response to the evidence of increasing educational equity we found in four Texas districts we studied. Haney states that "it is hard to fathom how a district [Aldine Independent School District] with a highschool graduation rate of only 54% could conceivably be described as having achieved 'more equitable and higher success for all groups of children.'" In our view, it is extremely important for us to gain research-based understanding of how educators in some urban school districts have grappled with inequity and have achieved significant progress toward closing historic equity gaps on a variety of measures, when typical urban schools are "resistant to reform, almost reform-proof" (Payne & Kaba, 2001). If we are to conduct such research, we must conduct it in real (not utopian) school districts, which means that our study sites will be imperfect places confronting significant challenges and not districts that are succeeding in every area all at once.

Aldine ISD serves over 50,000 students, 83% of whom are African American or Latina/o, and our field research there revealed broad-based improvements throughout the district in the type of curriculum being provided for students, in the instructional strategies in use in the classrooms, in the beliefs and attitudes of the educators there toward the children they serve, and in quantitative measures of achievement, including TAAS scores and end-of-course examinations in algebra and biology. Certainly the percentage of students earning regular high school diplomas in Aldine is not where anyone would want it to be, including the Aldine leadership. But this situation is not as grim as Haney paints it, and it is improving. The district has responded to its drop-out problem with a systematic effort, and thus has implemented numerous programmatic responses, such as the creating 9th-grade centers at all high schools and organizing a night high school. For the graduating class of 1999 (according to recently improved Texas Education Agency data, in which all students must be individually accounted



for), 69.4% graduated, another 3.1% received a GED, and 15.4% remained in school, while the figures for the class of 1998 were 64.8% graduating, 4.0% receiving a GED, and 15.3% remaining in school (TEA, 2000). The obvious efforts of the adults and the children in this district in working toward and in accomplishing significant progress toward improved educational equity cannot be reduced to or negated by a single area of continuing concern, such as the drop-out rate, no matter how important that area is. It is, thus, not inconceivable to us (and, we would suggest, to anyone who actually went into the district and empirically studied the changes that have been made over the past 5 or 6 years, rather than simply viewing one variable from a distance) to hold up this district as an exemplar of an urban district that has made a major, focused commitment to educating well literally all of its students and thus to making significant progress toward improved educational equity.

### Conclusion

Perhaps the most important point we wish to make (or reiterate) here, however, is that the underachievement of children of color and their negative treatment in our schools in Texas and nationwide remain extremely serious problems, ones that have been impervious to any previously tried, statewide policy solutions. Rather than *only* emphasizing the failures of the educational system to serve children of color, of which it is true there are many, we should pay close attention to evidence in Texas and elsewhere that some accountability policy characteristics have begun to interfere with the persistent, day-to-day normality of systemic racism and thus educational inequity for children of color. Clearly, as Haney and Klein eloquently point out, the evidence of improving educational equity is not uncontested, and there is good, empirical evidence, including the important work of Haney and Klein, that inequity is increasing in some places. But, is it even reasonable to think that after decades and decades of the persistently horrible treatment, racist treatment, of children of color in public schools that within only a few years we would see uniform progress toward equity across all variables and in all contexts?

We, therefore, repeat the call we made in “Accountability for Equity” to move research about accountability and educational equity forward by resisting the temptation to polarize and argue adversarially and, instead, to engage in respectful dialogue that appreciatively acknowledges and values wide-ranging and diverse results and perspectives. Is it not reasonable and fruitful to expect all participants in this discussion to recognize and validate that there are legitimate differences in the scholarship in this complex area of research? We strongly believe, consequently, that a more dialogic approach is ultimately more likely to result in accomplishing the goal all of us should be able to agree is critically needed—increased equitable academic achievement for children of color in U.S. schools. We believe that what is at stake here for children of color, their well-being, and their future lives, and really for all of us as citizens in what is

supposed to be an equitable democracy, is much too critical and too important for any scholar to argue as if she or he has the one right answer, research result, or perspective.

### References

- Carnoy, M., Loeb, S., & Smith, T.L. (2000, April). *Do higher state test scores in Texas make for better high school outcomes?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Grissmer, D., Flanagan, A., Kawata, J., & Williamson, S. (2000). *Improving student achievement: What NAEP state test scores tell us*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Mollison, A. (2001, April 30). Efforts fail to reduce dropouts across the U.S. [Electronic version]. *Austin American Statesman*.
- Payne, C.M., & Kaba, M. (2001). So much reform, so little change: Building-level obstacles to urban school reform. Unpublished manuscript.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (2000). *1999–2000 AEIS reports*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2000/index.html>



## **PART III**

# **Equity-Focused Research and Responses on Accountability**



# CHAPTER 9

## Displacing Deficit Thinking in School District Leadership

LINDA SKRLA AND JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH

*The law is very clear. It does not give us a choice of teaching just those that are easy to teach. The law says we shall teach all students.*

—Gerald Anderson, former superintendent of schools,  
Brazosport Independent School District

*We need to void ourselves of an ego, primarily so that we can allow everybody else to grow, understanding that there is a goal in mind—that is, student performance needs to improve. Not performance only as a test score.*

—Felipe Alaniz, former superintendent,  
San Benito Consolidated Independent School District

### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Richard Valencia, in his 1997 book *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking*, compellingly argued that deficit thinking is the dominant paradigm that shapes U.S. educators' explanations for widespread and persistent school failure among children from low-income homes and children of color:

The deficit thinking paradigm, as a whole, posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster— such a familial deficits and dysfunctions.... The popular “at-risk” construct, now entrenched in educational circles, views poor and working class children and their families (typically of color) as predominantly responsible for school failure, (p. xi)

Valencia argued, further, that such deficit thinking is deeply embedded in educational thought and practice and that it pervades schools that serve children from low-income homes and children of color. That is, even though virtually every U.S. school has a mission statement containing some form of the aphorism

“all children can learn,” actual practices and programs in these same schools are suffused with deficit views of the educability of children of color and children from low-income homes. The result of this pervasive deficit approach is that students from low-income homes and students of color routinely and overwhelmingly are tracked into low-level classes, identified for special education, segregated based on their home languages, subjected to more and harsher disciplinary actions; pushed out of the system and labeled “drop-outs,” underidentified as “gifted and talented,” immersed in negative and “subtractive” school climates, and sorted into a plethora of “remedial,” “compensatory,” or “special” programs (e.g., Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Parker, 1993; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Valdés, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999).

As these and other traditionally accepted and widely implemented schooling structures and practices persistently fail to serve well children of color and children from low-income homes, these students perform at or near the bottom of virtually every measurement of educational attainment, including grade-point averages, college admissions test scores, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). This low performance reinforces deficit views of these children and their families and becomes a driving force behind what Valencia (1997) described as a ubiquitous “description-explanation-prediction-prescription” cycle in U.S. public schools (p. 7). In other words, first, educators *describe* deficits, deficiencies, limitations, and shortcomings in children of color and children from low-income homes; next, educators *explain* these deficits by locating them in such factors as limited intelligence or dysfunctional families; then, educators *predict* the perpetuation and accumulation of the deficits; and, finally, educators *prescribe* educational interventions designed to remediate the deficits. This cycle has become self-perpetuating as the system in place in traditional U.S. schools, by design, produces failure for some students (see McDermott, 1997, for example), particularly students of color and students from low-income homes, and then uses the failure as evidence that the “problem” lies with/in the children, their families, their neighborhoods, their genetics, their social capital, and so forth, rather than with the educational system and its deficit assumptions.

Not surprisingly, then, school superintendents who lead school districts populated by children of color and children from low-income homes typically are also strongly affected by deficit thinking. Whether it is conscious or not, these superintendents’ explanations of, and expectations for, what is possible educationally for the children in their districts are shaped by the larger deficit educational discourse that assumes these children will not succeed in school. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of U.S. public school superintendents are White (95%) and male (86%) (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000), and it is likely that deficit views of children of color and children from low-income homes have been reinforced by these superintendents’ own prior experiences as teachers and campus leaders. Even superintendents of color (who know that

children of color can be highly successful because they themselves were those children) are influenced by and have to contend with the deficit thinking that suffuses every part of U.S. public schooling (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999). Thus, superintendents of school districts that serve children of color and children from low-income homes are unlikely to deeply, sincerely believe—though they may speak the “all children can learn” rhetoric—that their districts can or will successfully educate all the children in their charge. It is not, in other words, the serious, immediate intent of most superintendents of schools in districts that serve children of color and children from low-income home to produce widespread and equitable high academic achievement for all the children in all the schools in their districts. Because of the insidiously pervasive deficit thinking in which superintendents, along with the vast majority of other educators including teachers and principals, have been more or less marinated throughout their careers, these superintendents tend to view the broad-scale underperformance of children of color and children from low-income homes in their schools as inevitable, something that is not within their power to change.

Indeed, accumulated empirical evidence from decades of U.S. public schooling would tend to support the above conclusion. U.S. schools and school districts have posted a miserable record in demonstrating sustained success with educating African-American, Latina/o, Native-American or other children of color or children of any race from low-income homes (Lomotey, 1990). There have been some few examples of individual schools that have achieved remarkable results in educating children of color and children from low-income homes, such as those Ronald Edmonds (1986) studied. However, these schools have been most often regarded as “miracles” or “mavericks” led by exceptional, heroic principals, and broader-scale success has been almost nonexistent. In addition, historically, there have been virtually no examples of entire school districts that have been successful educating children of color or children from low-income homes for any period of time.

With no exemplar school districts, or, by extension, superintendents, demonstrating that district-wide high academic performance for racially and economically diverse students is possible and achievable, deficit thinking has remained the dominant, unchallenged paradigm that school district leaders have used to explain to others or make sense to themselves of the “persistent, pervasive, and disproportionate” (Lomotey, 1990, p. 2) underachievement in school of children of color and children from low-income homes. Within the past 5 years, however, a very few examples of sustained district-wide academic success for children of color and children from low-income homes have begun to emerge in the research literature. These examples have appeared in states that have highly developed, stable accountability systems with equity-oriented components, such as New York, North Carolina, and Texas (see, for e.g., Elmore & Burney, 1997; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000; Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999). Preliminary research in some of these districts points to the possibility that the superintendents have found ways to



resist deficit thinking and, thus, to make strong, demonstrable progress toward educational equity in their districts.

The fact that these districts have emerged in high-stakes accountability states is not, in our view, coincidental. In the research study on which this chapter is based, which focused on four highly successful Texas school districts, it became clear early on to the research team that the particular configuration of the Texas accountability system had played a crucial role in the transformation of the districts under study. It also soon became clear in conversations with the superintendents that the accountability system had been influential in reshaping their orientations toward the leadership of their districts. In effect, responding to the demands of an extremely high-stakes state accountability system that explicitly required the same level of academic success for all student groups (including African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged) had displaced—though certainly not totally eliminated—deficit thinking for these superintendents. We identified five major ways in which accountability operated to accomplish this substantial displacement of deficit thinking in the superintendents' leadership in our study districts. These five methods of displacement are discussed (after a section that outlines study methodology) in the remainder of this article.

### **Methodology**

Four Texas public school districts, with student populations ranging from 8,000 to 50,000, served as the study sites for the research on which this article is based. These districts were selected for multi-year, grant-funded study<sup>1</sup> because they all had demonstrated significant improvement on Texas state achievement tests (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills [TAAS]) for children of color and children from low-income homes and had closed achievement gaps between the performance of these children and that of White, middle-class students. These districts were also selected based on a broad range of other quantitative evidence of improvement in academic performance for all student groups, including African-American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged students.

In 1997, a pilot study for the current project identified eleven Texas public school districts (out of 1,045 districts in Texas, not including charter schools) that met two criteria for equitable district-wide success: a district enrollment over 5,000 students (to ensure multiple campuses and, thus, a “district” effect) and more than one third of high poverty campuses (schools at which more than 50% of students were eligible for federal free or reduced-price lunch assistance) rated “recognized” or “exemplary” in the state accountability system. To earn a recognized rating in the Texas system, at least 80% of all students, as well as 80% of African-American, Hispanic, White, and low-income students, must pass each section (reading, writing, and mathematics) of TAAS and meet additional drop-out and attendance standards. To be rated exemplary, schools and districts

must have a 90% pass rate for all groups in all subjects tested on TAAS and meet attendance and drop-out standards.

During the summer of 1999 (at the beginning of current research and two years after the beginning of the pilot study) analysis of Texas school district performance data using the same screening criteria that were used in the pilot study (which produced 11 districts) yielded a list of 36 school districts. This indicated that the number of districts with several high-achieving, high-poverty schools had increased sharply in 2 years. However, the vast majority of the high-poverty campuses receiving recognized or exemplary ratings statewide both in 1997 and in 1999 were elementary schools. To be considered district-wide success, high and equitable academic achievement should not end with 6th grade. Therefore, a third selection criterion was added: Districts selected for study had to have at least two secondary (middle school or high school) campuses rated recognized or exemplary. The addition of this criterion reduced the number of districts under consideration for study to 15. A fourth level of screening was then applied to minimize the likelihood that questionable district practices could have artificially inflated student performance gains. Any districts that had high (above state average for similar schools) exemptions from testing for students receiving special education or students with limited English proficiency (LEP), excessive drop-out rates, or excessive 9th-grade retention rates were eliminated from consideration for study.

This left 11 districts on the list for the fifth level of the selection process, which involved evaluation of longitudinal performance data on high-end academic measures, including percentages of disaggregated student groups taking and scoring above standard college admission criteria on SAT/ACT;<sup>2</sup> percentage of disaggregated student groups earning passing scores on algebra end-of-course tests;<sup>3</sup> percentage of disaggregated student groups completing the college-preparatory Recommended High School Program;<sup>4</sup> and percentage of disaggregated student groups enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and earning a score of 3 or higher on AP tests. Although none of the 11 districts demonstrated the same rapid improvement for all disaggregated student groups or narrowed the gaps between the performance of White and middle-class children and children of color and children from low-income homes on these measures to the same degree as they had on TAAS, several districts had both improved performance and had narrowed gaps on one or more of these measures. The districts that had done so (7 in all) remained under consideration for study. The final four districts ultimately selected from the finalist group of seven were chosen to represent the diversity (geographic, district size, and racial/ethnic composition) of the state of Texas (see [Table 9.1](#)).

The districts chosen were Aldine Independent School District (ISD), Brazosport ISD, San Benito Consolidated Independent School District (CISD), and Wichita Falls ISD. Only one district (Brazosport) chosen for study was also included in the pilot study. (Aldine was identified as one of the 11 high-success districts in 1997, but did not participate in the pilot phase of the project.) The four districts

selected for study had multiple indicators of widespread improvement in student performance for all student groups. Brief profiles of the four districts follow.

### *Participant Districts*

*Aldine ISD* is one of the twelve largest school districts in Texas, with 56 campuses and almost 50,000 students. It is located in the northwest Houston metropolitan area and covers 111 square miles. Its schools serve a variety of communities including rural, suburban, commercial, and industrial areas. The student population is 47% Hispanic, 36% African American, 14% White, and 71% economically disadvantaged. The district earned a recognized accountability rating in 1999–2000 for the fourth consecutive year. Mr. M.B. “Sonny” Donaldson was the superintendent in Aldine at the time study data were collected.

*Brazosport ISD* is located on the Texas gulf coast, 50 miles southwest of Houston, and serves a diverse group of small towns and communities. About 50,000 residents live in the area, and the school district’s enrollment is 13,247 students. The children in Brazosport ISD are 56% White, 33% Hispanic, 9% African American, and 39% economically disadvantaged. Brazosport has been rated exemplary for the past three years and was recognized for the two previous years. At the time study data were collected, Dr. Gerald Anderson was the Brazosport superintendent.

*San Benito CISD* is located in the Rio Grande Valley area of South Texas, seven miles east of the small city of Harlingen. The primary industry for the area is agriculture. The town of San Benito has a population of 26,350; the school district serves 8,697 pupils. The students in San Benito CISD are 97% Hispanic, 3% White, and 87% economically disadvantaged. The district has held a recognized accreditation rating for five consecutive years, beginning in 1995–96. Mr. Joe D. González is the San Benito superintendent. He was preceded by Dr. Felipe Alaniz, who also participated in study interviews.

*Wichita Falls ISD (WFISD)* is located in northwest Texas, approximately 100 miles north of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. The city of Wichita Falls has approximately 100,000 residents and is home to Sheppard Air Force Base, Midwestern State University, and a variety of petroleum- and agriculture-based industries. Wichita Falls ISD has 15,293 students; 63% are White, 18% are Hispanic, 16% are African American, and 46% are economically disadvantaged. In 1999–2000 Wichita Falls ISD earned a recognized rating for the first time. Dr. Connie Welsh was superintendent of Wichita Falls ISD at the time of the study. Her predecessor, under whom the district’s transformation began, was Dr. Leslie Carnine.

**Table 9.1** Characteristics of Districts Selected for Study

<b>District</b>	<b>Total Students</b>	<b># of Schools</b>	<b>% African American</b>	<b>% Hispanic</b>	<b>% White</b>	<b>% Low-income</b>	<b>1999-2000 Rating</b>	<b>Location</b>
Aldine	49,453	56	36	47	14	71	Recog.	Metro Houston
Brazosport	13,247	19	9	33	56	39	Exemp.	Gulf Coast
San Benito	8,697	17	0	97	3	87	Recog.	Rio Grande Valley
Wichita Falls	15,293	31	16	18	63	46	Recog.	Northwest Texas

Source: Texas Education Agency, 1999b

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

A team of six researchers (the two authors, plus Joseph F. Johnson of the Charles A. Dana Center at UT Austin and three graduate research assistants, Dawn Hogan, James Koschoreck, and Pamela Smith) made multiple site visits to the four districts in fall 1999 and spring 2000 for the purpose of collecting extensive qualitative data. While in the districts, we interviewed board members, superintendents, central office staff, principals, teachers, parents, newspaper staff, business leaders, and community members. We also shadowed district staff and principals, observed classrooms, and attended community functions. The research team audio-recorded over 200 individual and group interviews and collected thousands of pages of observation notes and documents. Data analysis began on the first day of the first site visit, included twice-daily team-debriefing sessions, and continued for six months following the completion of site visits. The research team also utilized qualitative research software, *Folio Views 4.2*, to assist in the coding and thematizing of the large volume of interview transcripts and documents. The study results concerning the displacement of deficit thinking in school district leadership discussed in this article have been pulled from the larger set of findings from this multi-year study. Additional portions of the study findings will be reported in other academic and practitioner-oriented publications (see Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000).

### **Results: Five Ways Accountability Displaces Deficit Thinking**

The four superintendents in our study districts participated in multiple interviews (2–4 each) during the course of the research team’s site visits to the districts. Additional superintendent interview data were gathered during pilot study interviews with Brazosport superintendent Gerald Anderson and a single interview with Felipe Alaniz, the former San Benito superintendent who preceded Joe González. Also, interviews with central office staff, principals, teachers, board members, parents, and community members included questions about the superintendents’ leadership and influence on the districts’ transformations. During all of the interviews with the superintendents themselves, which were conducted by various members of the research team singly and in pairs, the superintendents frequently mentioned the impact of the state accountability system on them and on the transformation that had taken place in their districts. They also often gave examples of their current thinking contrasted with how they thought “back in the olden days” (as Aldine superintendent Sonny Donaldson phrased it) before state accountability. Sometimes the superintendents were amazingly candid about the deficit thinking that dominated their prior leadership perspective, as when Gerald Anderson, the Brazosport superintendent, told us,

I have made this transformation that all kids can learn, from one that thought we were going to have an extremely difficult time with these kids because of their low socioeconomic condition.... It [the new transformed perspective] isn't something I've had all my life.

Other superintendents discussed the shift in their thinking less directly. Nonetheless, all five superintendents we interviewed strongly credited the Texas accountability system with playing a major role in transformations of their districts and in assisting them as leaders to alter the prevailing deficit norms in their school districts. The five ways accountability operated, it is argued here, to displace this deficit thinking included: (a) providing highly visible, irrefutable evidence, which could not be ignored, that the districts were *not* serving all children equally well; (b) shifting the political risk inherent in confronting racial and socioeconomic class educational inequity and in mandating improved performance for all student groups away from the district leadership to the state department of education; (c) forcing the superintendents to seek out exemplars of successful classrooms and schools for children of color and children from low-income homes and, thus, to grow as instructional leaders; (d) causing the superintendents to reevaluate deficit views and to develop anti-deficit orientations to district leadership; and (e) driving ever-increasing expectations of and higher goals for academic achievement for all groups of children as incremental success was experienced. Each of these is discussed below.

### *Accountability Makes Educational Inequity Visible*

In the early 1990s (TAAS was given for the first time in 1991; the current system began in 1994), the Texas accountability system revealed low passing rates statewide on TAAS for African American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students and large gaps between the performance of these groups and that of White children and children from middle- and upper-income homes. For example, in 1994, the passing rate on the mathematics portion of TAAS statewide was 38% for African-American students, 47% for Hispanic students, 45% for economically disadvantaged students, and 73% for White students (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 1994). In other words, statewide, White students passed the math test at a rate that was nearly double the passing rate for African-American students in 1994.

In some individual schools and districts, the performance for children of color and children from low-income homes on TAAS and other reported indicators was dramatically worse than were the already low state figures. In our study districts, for example, Brazosport had an elementary campus at which only 8.3% of African-American children passed TAAS math in 1993, and only 33.8% of African-American students passed the math TAAS in the entire Wichita Falls district in 1994. Data on other performance indicators beyond TAAS showed even more dismal performance in some areas.

All of this data and much more was publicly available and readily accessible (through the Texas Education Agency's Web site: [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)) not only to educators, but to anyone else who had an interest in how schools or districts were performing—this included the media, activist groups, parents, community members, policy makers, and researchers. These extensive data showed clearly that all students were not benefiting to the same degree from the educational programs in the study districts, and this had a profound effect on their superintendents. Before the advent of state accountability, the study districts' superintendents, like the majority of their fellow superintendents, had been able to ignore indications that their districts might not be serving all students equitably. Furthermore, prevailing deficit thinking allowed the inequities to be explained away as normal and inevitable.

Explaining away inequitable student achievement and ignoring student performance indicators generally was possible, and was, in fact, standard operating procedure for superintendents in pre-accountability Texas because, back then, the assessment of a "good" superintendent was made primarily based on his or her political shrewdness and skill and on managerial-type indicators, such as financial stability, clean buildings, and well-behaved students. Rowan and Miskel (1999, drawing from Meyer & Rowan's 1977 work) described this type of judgement of superintendent ability as being based on how close the superintendent was able to bring the school district to widely shared organizational norms of "good schooling." They argued, further, that adherence to these norms was actually more important for the survival of institutions such as schools (and likewise their superintendents' professional survival) than was fulfilling the "technical core" mission of the school district—educating students—and that this allowed school leaders to ignore information that showed the core mission was not being fulfilled:

A logic of confidence and good faith develops in organizations as administrators deliberately ignore and discount information about technical activities and outcomes [such as teaching and learning] in order to maintain the appearance that things are working as they should be, even if they aren't. In this way, organizations continue to mobilize support and resources simply by conforming to externally-defined rules, even when such rules do not promote technical efficiency.... The legitimacy of schooling as an enterprise depend[s] crucially on maintaining the public's confidence...and this require [s] educators (and the public) to ignore obvious variations in classroom activities and student outcomes that occur within standardized forms of schooling, (p. 363)

Thus, prior to accountability, the superintendents in the study districts worked to maintain the status quo and the appearance of good schooling (though they did not conceptualize it as such at the time) and ignored or dismissed information that contradicted this appearance. Gerald Anderson described this maintenance

orientation to the superintendency: “I probably could have been considered just your normal superintendent that thought if you won the state football championship and all that sort of stuff, that that was the most important thing.”

Though superintendents in Texas today typically still care deeply about football championships, the advent of the Texas accountability system interrupted the comfortable pattern of institutional conformity over which the superintendents had previously presided. Because of the particular configuration of accountability measures in the Texas system, it caused dramatic, and often sudden, changes in expectations for the role of superintendent in Texas. The system components that, taken together, impacted expectations for superintendents were: (1) Texas school and school district accountability is based on a criterion-reference test rather than on a normreferenced test; (2) it has fixed standards of performance required for all student groups (as opposed to rating on “improvement” or predicting pass rates based on demographics as some systems do); and (3) it disaggregates data by racial group and socioeconomic status. An illustration of how this configuration of accountability measures impacted expectations for superintendent performance was Gerald Anderson’s description of his first encounter with the force of accountability:

[At] my very first board meeting as superintendent [in Brazosport], we had a group of parents from Freeport, which is a predominantly low socioeconomic community, that came before the board with some good data [generated by the accountability system]. In the public forum portion of the board meeting they asked that very uncomfortable question to the board and myself—why are the students in Freeport not performing at the same level as the students in Lake Jackson, which is a middle and upper class socioeconomic community. Needless to say that is a very uncomfortable question for board members, for sure, and for the superintendent to have to respond to. Because we have been conditioned to think [that some students] just aren’t going to do as well as other kids because they don’t have that support at home.... The significance of that incident is that it motivated us—it focused us on addressing the issue.

Gerald Anderson’s success in Brazosport has attracted considerable national and international attention in the past 3 years, and he tells the story of the transformation of his district frequently at workshops, speaking engagements, and seminars. He typically begins his story with the above incident, which a Latina central office administrator in Brazosport described to us as “the Hispanic people put together a little welcome...that really challenged Dr. Anderson.”

Similarly, Sonny Donaldson, who had been superintendent in Aldine for 14 years at the time the study data were collected, talked about how the accountability system data forced him and other district administrators to confront the inequitable achievement in the district that they previously ignored, and he even went so far as to say that they probably would not have looked at the



data unless required to by the state. Mr. Donaldson also talked about how, before this data was available and before they were required to look at it, the district leadership had unrealistically positive views of the academic success of the district's African American and Hispanic students. He said that, because Aldine had African American high school valedictorians and had some Hispanic students who excelled academically, he and other administrators assumed children of color were "doing fine" in Aldine.

Felipe Alaniz, who was superintendent in San Benito when the district's transformation began in 1994, said that the accountability system played a key role in starting the improvement in that district by highlighting the problem of poor student performance:

We used [the accountability system] as a tool to measure competency and progress. In my eyes we used it as a starting point to illuminate what the district didn't have, to show that what we were doing in the classroom was perhaps dysfunctional.... We knew we had a disjointed structure in the curriculum and what we were doing and the materials that we had and what was being taught. That was pretty obvious to us [from looking at the accountability data].

In much the same way, Connie Welsh, the Wichita Falls superintendent who came to the district in 1997, described her view that performance data indicated district dysfunction, something that she learned by researching the district's performance prior to accepting the superintendent's job:

I'm a data person, and I make no decision lightly. Of course I pulled up everything [about the district] on the Internet that I possibly could. I talked to Les Carnine [the former superintendent].... As I looked at it, I saw a district that had some good things that were there, but I also sensed a great amount of dysfunctionality. [Some of the scores were] horrible, horrible.

Dr. Welsh used accountability data to not only identify and build on district strengths but also to target areas of dysfunctionality, such as a lack of instructional focus indicated by extremely low achievement test scores.

In sum, publicly available, empirical data that demonstrated differential educational success for students distributed along race and social class lines acted to begin the displacement of deficit thinking for the study district superintendents. The superintendents were, in effect, forced to adapt to new demands created by public visibility of student performance.

### *State Accountability Reduces Risk for Superintendents*

In the absence of a state mandate to disaggregate student performance data and meet specific and equitable performance criteria for all racial and socioeconomic

groups of students, a superintendent who challenges existing patterns of academic inequality within the district himself or herself engages in a politically risky undertaking. Persons of power and influence in communities, many of whom are likely to be school board members, may be deeply uncomfortable with confronting educational inequity (Puriefoy, 2000). One of the study superintendents described the situation as a lack of understanding of the importance of educating all children equally well:

[Board members sometimes] don't understand the complexity. They come from a place where they support, but really don't understand, that it's important that all children be successful. They are in a different social arena. They don't understand how much work it takes to do what it is that we're doing. We do it because it's good for children and because we're committed to children, and they don't see the significance of that, the importance of that.

Superintendents who take on the challenge of addressing educational inequity (and thus resist the dominance of deficit thinking that explains away or views as natural inequities in student achievement), in the absence of a state accountability system that requires disaggregation of data, often find themselves embroiled in local political controversy, and these superintendents must expend considerable political capital maintaining support for confronting inequity along race and socioeconomic class lines.

The specific design of the Texas accountability system, however, reduces political risk for superintendents by mandating from the state level that performance be considered by disaggregated groups and that the performance of *all* student groups be considered in the ratings of campuses and districts and in the evaluations of teachers, principals, and superintendents. Aldine superintendent Sonny Donaldson explained the importance of a state mandated equity focus:

The state leadership has to set the agenda. I think individual schools can do it [create high and equitable student success], but I think the people that control the gold, the money, they're going to have to commit to something like this.... There has to be an expectation created by someone at the state level, and if the state level doesn't do it, it will just have to go on the strength of the superintendent's personality and the support he has from the board.

As Mr. Donaldson pointed out, the superintendent who does not have the force of the state behind her or him in confronting educational inequity and the deficit thinking that protects the status quo is in a vulnerable position.

Furthermore, the disaggregated data provided by the Texas accountability system (but not by most other states) was considered one of the essential factors

for improving student performance by our study district superintendents. From Gerald Anderson:

Some [states] are not disaggregating their data. Some of them are reporting it by all students. That's a big mistake.... Whether we believe that the state accountability system or the TAAS test is all that good, the effects of what the state has pushed us to do is going to have the effect of us doing a better job of teaching all kids.

As this quote illustrates, the superintendents saw the state system as a needed “push” that was resulting in better education for all children.

The “push” of the accountability system was viewed positively by our study district superintendents, but they were also mindful that balance was essential. In other words, the state pressure could become a negative force if the district did not provide appropriate support and training for teachers to enable them to meet continuously rising state performance expectations. Joe González described this as his biggest challenge—making sure that his district was equipped to handle the new, higher expectations coming from expanded state accountability, which, beginning in 2003, will include a more difficult test, tests in more subjects, and testing at additional grade levels (9th and 11th) not included in the current accountability system:

The biggest challenge is to continue to motivate the instructional staff because of all the [accountability] changes TEA is coming up with, staying up with staff development and everything else to ensure that our teachers are being provided the training and the tools necessary to meet those challenges for the children.... We are good at what we do; we just have to refine. I told [the staff] that there's always going to be obstacles that the state's going to throw at us, new initiatives that they feel are good for the state. So we just go to meet them, meet the challenge and keep moving.

Mr. González, thus, used the force of rising state accountability expectations positively in communicating his own expectations for student performance in his district.

All the superintendents in our study districts were, consequently, able to use state accountability to work against deficit thinking and against the description-explanation-prediction-prescription cycle that maintained students of color and students from low-income homes at the bottom of school achievement measures without as much risk as they otherwise would have faced in challenging these issues. Because the Texas state accountability system mandated that scores be reported by disaggregated student groups and that fixed and equitable student performance criteria be reached, performance inequities within the study districts, by law if not by local choice, had to be confronted.

*Accountability Forces Superintendents to Seek Success  
Exemplars*

The prevalence of deficit thinking in school district leadership is compounded by the dominant view of the superintendency that holds that women and men in these positions do not have much direct impact on instructional matters or on student learning in any case (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990). The common perspective is that the superintendency is a position remote from classroom learning and that superintendents' more appropriate roles are tending to the political, cultural, financial, and logistical domains of schooling, leaving teaching and learning to the campuses, which are viewed as properly the sites of school reform (Berry & Achilles, 1999). As Petersen (1999) found, superintendents generally have abdicated the instructional leadership role to others within the organization, most usually campus principals.

With the advent of state accountability in Texas, the study district superintendents were pushed to move out of the traditional managerial or political superintendent role and focus on instruction, particularly on instructional practices that supported equitable achievement for all children. Gerald Anderson put it this way:

[In my two previous superintendencies] I was not an instructional leader. I was a manager. I was just managing the schools. I didn't have a strong instructional focus.... I have to give the state accountability system the credit for bringing about the motivation [to change].

Just as Gerald Anderson was motivated to change by the state accountability system, Sonny Donaldson described his response to the realization that Aldine students were not performing well on the state achievement tests and that the district leadership would need to figure out a way to respond:

I said, "Nadine [Kujawa, the Deputy Superintendent], find out who's doing a good job with kids like we have." And there weren't many districts in the state that had kids like we have. We visited around and looked at the work they'd been doing. Jerry [Anderson, the Brazosport superintendent] was almost like we were, not quite like we were but about fifty percent [low-income children]. He came up and did a staff development. We went to North Forest; they had a teacher over there that was doing great things in algebra.

Donaldson admittedly did not know what needed to be done to raise achievement for children of color and children from low-income homes in his district, but he and other district leaders took the initial step of finding models of instructional success (including Brazosport) from which they could learn. Connie Welsh, also, talked about the value of using Brazosport's success as a model on which to build her district's program: "We hooked into Brazosport's 8-Step

model, basically using it for data analysis and planning instructional programs and planning for individual kids—the academic focus.”

Additionally, Felipe Alaniz described learning how to focus the district and campuses on instructional performance for all children. His initial learning came from his previous experience as an assistant superintendent in West Texas, not with the current accountability system but with its predecessor, “Results Based Monitoring”:

We learned from [Results Based Monitoring]. One of the things we learned from putting that in place was the ability to have each of the schools internalize what they were good at and not so good at. Then to make a proactive response and have the central office become a support team... and develop a plan of assistance for each campus.

Results Based Monitoring, like the present accountability system, created a learning opportunity for Alaniz that he then used to initiate change in San Benito.

All five superintendents whom we interviewed talked to us about having to personally respond and grow as instructional leaders in order to meet the demands placed on them by the accountability system. Prior to accountability, these superintendents had enjoyed successful careers without ever having to learn how to create district conditions in which all children could learn successfully. After the advent of accountability, however, the state required all districts to achieve fixed performance standards for all student groups. In districts that initially performed far below the acceptable standards, these superintendents made decisions to learn how to create district-wide success.

#### *Accountability Develops Anti-Deficit Leadership Orientations*

Carolyn Riehl (2000), in a review of research on principals’ roles in creating inclusive schools, described the crucial role school leaders play in influencing meaning-making in schools:

As institutionalized organizations, schools embody a complex array of understandings, beliefs, and values that find legitimacy through their acceptance by the broader public and that are encoded in school structures, cultures, and routine practices. Schools are, in effect, constructed around the meanings that people hold about them. Real organizational change occurs not simply when technical changes in structure and process are undertaken, but when persons inside and outside of the school construct new understandings about what the change means. In this regard, the role of the school principal is crucial. Although meanings are negotiated socially, that is through a shared process (Miron, 1997), leaders typically have additional power in defining situations and their meanings, (p. 60)

The same point the Riehl made about principals—that they have great power and influence in shaping (and also changing) what meanings are shared by others in their schools—could just as aptly be made about superintendents' influence on meaning-making in their districts.

In the “olden days” that Sonny Donaldson spoke of, that is, pre-accountability Texas, deficit thinking was the dominant paradigm that shaped the ways educators made meaning about the lack of school success for children of color and children from low-income homes. These deficit views were shared, largely unproblematically, by the majority of educators in the study districts. Our interview data are, in fact, filled with countless references from interviewees other than the superintendents that describe deficit orientations that existed in these schools and districts. For example, a former San Benito board member described the old viewpoint among those on the board as that the most important issues for board members were to keep taxes low and to stay in minimal compliance with the law. He said that, because the children in the district were from low-income homes, many of which did not have air-conditioning, the board members felt there was no need to air-condition the schools because, as he said, “gnats don’t bother them when they are studying.” Likewise, a central office administrator in Brazosport criticized earlier deficit attitudes of herself and others when she said that she and other administrators felt “noble” about working in high-poverty schools because they kept the children “warm, safe, and on a regular schedule” and that they thought the poor academic performance of the students was “inevitable and not anyone’s fault.”

These four districts today are very different places than they were when their transformations began in the early 1990s. Deficit views of the educability of children of color and children from low-income homes have been significantly displaced. However, this does not mean that deficit thinking has been totally eliminated in any of the four districts. Our interviews and observations showed that the deficit discourse is still in circulation, more so in some schools and less so in others. But the deficit discourse was no longer the dominant one in any of the districts.

The key person in all four districts who led the change in shared meaning about the education of children of color and children of low-income homes was the superintendent. All five of the superintendents we interviewed very clearly articulated what could be considered anti-deficit leadership orientations. These viewpoints were developed during the course of multiple years of responding to, and achieving laudable success in, a high-stakes accountability environment. An example of how the superintendents articulated this anti-deficit orientation was Connie Welsh’s linking of the success of society to the efforts to educate children for whom learning may not come easily or automatically:

You’ve got a group of kids, there’s a whole top group of kids that come to our door that learn in spite of us, not because of us. That’s that top group; they’re learning in spite of us. You just have to throw it out there and they

feed on it. But then you have this other group of children that does take a very focused effort and a real strong plan in order to get them to move. But they can. That's really going to be the success of our entire society. We have to do it. I've been at this for 35 years, and...if nothing else on my tombstone, I want somebody to say I was able to make a difference.

Dr. Welsh's passionate conviction that "we have to do it [educate all children]" was echoed by Gerald Anderson:

I heard enough of people thinking that they just couldn't reach those students as much, perhaps because of the home environment and because of the lack of educational preparation that they brought to the door. I too believed that there was going to be great difficulty with that because of the lack of educational preparation coming from the home. But I have come to know that even though we can do some things to help that, we cannot make excuses for that.... You cannot let anything deter you from that instructional focus and you have to believe the kids can do it.

For both of these superintendents, the necessity of educating literally all children to high levels of success was a deeply held conviction that they articulated clearly, forcefully, and repeatedly whenever and wherever they spoke to individuals and groups in their districts.

A similar sense of moral obligation to educate all children and belief that such was possible was expressed by Sonny Donaldson:

I think that all our kids can learn when given the time and resources and the proper motivation, and they can do it. Don't get me wrong, we are not where we need to be, but we are a hell of a lot closer now than we were five years ago. We have narrowed the gap.... I want to win the battle against ignorance and illiteracy because it is the right thing to do. It's my job and it's my profession; it's what I am about.

Just as the Aldine superintendent had come to believe that educating everyone was "what I am about," the San Benito superintendent, Joe González, felt that educating the Hispanic children in his district successfully was his life's work:

Having 97% Hispanic kids is, this is our life. I hear other superintendents wanting advice from me about what we're doing to help the kids. You know, they don't know what to do with them, and they have 30% or 40%, making me feel like they just got some type of animal. They forget that they're children just like anybody else.... I look at them as children.... I'm very, very competitive and I hold very high expectations of our kids. I don't believe that they are going to flop, and I don't let anybody believe that that's going to work with them.

As these quotes clearly illustrate, the superintendents articulated anti-deficit stances that played critical and significant roles in shaping what meanings were shared in these districts about the education of children of color and children from low-income homes.

*Accountability Drives Successively Higher Expectations*

Even though all the superintendents we interviewed in the four study districts discussed their districts' efforts to raise student performance on TAAS, they also all also talked about their goals for the districts to have high and equitable success on other measures of student performance beyond the state achievement tests. Furthermore, they often described these new, higher goals as being linked to successful experiences with raising student performance on the TAAS. In other words, they may have gone through a period of narrowly focusing on state test performance, but they did not stay there. Once they saw that all students could achieve at much higher levels than previously accepted in their districts as the (deficit driven) norm, they all began to articulate higher expectations for their students' success.

Gerald Anderson, whose entire district was rated exemplary and had all 18 campuses earn recognized or exemplary performance ratings, talked about what the current district motto "exemplary and beyond" meant and his recognition that the district had not "arrived" in terms of broadly defined academic excellence:

We do have equity in our district. We have equity. We closed the gap. But I can't lay claim to being an excellent district until such time that I've closed the gap with AP, with SAT, with ACT, with all those "beyond" indicators.... Right now what you will find [in Brazosport] is like the definition of an Effective School, a school in which equal proportions of low and middle income kids evidence high levels of mastery of the basic curriculum, what we consider to be just the essential curriculum, but it's not the entire curriculum.

He went on to describe significant indicators of progress on a higher-end academic measure that went beyond what is measured by TAAS:

The reason why our algebra [end-of-course test passing rate] is twice as high as the state of Texas is because we use [a district-developed instructional process] and [have] the belief that "I am accountable to teach these kids".... Discipline referrals are down, the numbers of classes we have to remediate kids is down, the numbers of students in our higher level courses is up, the numbers of students taking dual and concurrent college courses is up. Drop-out rates are down.... I put a lot of pressure on our people not to let kids drop out because they're about to make the worst mistake of their life.



Dr. Anderson's comments about drop-out rates, particularly, indicate that, at least in his district, academic success for children of color and children from low-income homes is not being achieved at the cost of pushing these children out of the system. Joe González made a similar point about the tactic of raising student performance by over-referring students to special education programs or exempting them from testing due to LEP: "We are testing 90-plus percent of the population. Hiding the kids [through exemptions] is something I totally won't tolerate. I don't believe in hiding kids in closets."

Another indicator of rising expectations for student success among these superintendents came from Sonny Donaldson, who described to us his strong desire to have higher college admissions test scores for the students in Aldine:

We are going to have some national merit scholarships. Not just [students scoring] 1000+. We also have to do a better job of placing our kids, putting those kids in the courses that are rigorous that the kids can handle. We are not doing a good job on that. I don't want to hear about a kid who scored 1250 and was not in one advanced class. That happened once and my blood pressure went through the roof.... If we are going to be a school district of excellence, we cannot have that.

Clearly, Mr. Donaldson was committed to achieving higher measures of academic excellence in his district.

Connie Welsh, also, talked about rising expectations for high student performance beyond TAAS in describing her hopes for a new focus on preAP curriculum in Wichita Falls that was supported by grant funding and specifically targeted diverse groups of children:

Pre-AP is going to have a significant impact with our lower functioning kids because those are the kids, the poor kids, the ones that who never saw themselves as being eligible for AP, honors, and all that kind of stuff. We're trying to stimulate a much bigger, broad base of people who feel they can do the pre-AP. I think we are going to bring in more minorities, were going to bring in more of our socioeconomically disadvantaged kids into the playing field. They have the potential. It's just a matter of, again, expectation. They do what people expect of them.

High expectations for all students was, thus, a key point that Dr. Welsh emphasized repeatedly as central to her leadership.

Indeed, none of the five superintendents, during the time of our interviews, was content to define student success as high pass rates on TAAS. These superintendents definitely did not think that offering a minimal curriculum that covered only what was measured by the state achievement exam was the correct or desirable response to accountability in districts that served large percentages of children of color and children from low-income homes.

## Conclusion

What can be concluded from the research in these four districts is that the Texas high-stakes accountability system significantly (but not completely) displaced the deficit-thinking orientation of the superintendents. These superintendents and their districts did *not*, however, reach the absolute democratic ideal that we all seek—truly high and equal performance of all children, regardless of their race, ethnicity, home language, culture, socioeconomic class, and so on. What they *did* accomplish was one significant, critically important step on the journey toward that ideal. The superintendents, in collaboration with their board members, community allies, and other school leaders, moved the academic success levels and school experiences for children of color and children from low-income homes in these districts out of the dank and hideous basement of failure and invisibility where, prior to state accountability, they had remained undisturbed. The academic achievement and school treatment of children of color in the four study districts moved from this deficit basement to the main and well-lighted floor where it became the focus for teachers, principals, central office staff, and superintendents. This impressive progress from basement to main floor was evidenced not just in TAAS scores, but also in a broad array of other measures, indicating that improved and more equitable school success for students of color and students from low-income homes was not produced by simply teaching to a test. Who can argue with the importance of this critical step, given that a journey is never made in one move only?

Our findings, thus, suggest that accountability's displacement of deficit thinking for the study district superintendents was of major importance in moving the entire districts in a positive direction toward equity ideals. The superintendents in our study saw the accountability system as proving to them that their districts were *not* serving all children well. They also saw the state accountability system as picking up some of the potential local political cost of a large shift toward more educational equity in their districts. A third finding was that the accountability system forced these superintendents to seek out exemplars of academic success for children of color and children from low-income homes for the purpose of figuring out how their districts might accomplish the same. Fourth, our study indicated that the accountability system caused these superintendents to reevaluate their deficit-oriented views and then develop equity-oriented views. Finally, as they experienced academic success with students for whom they did not previously believe this was possible, as they experienced incremental success with these latter students, they year-by-year pushed expectations and goals higher and higher. However, we want to repeat once again that these superintendents and their districts had not reached democratic Utopia, and they told us that themselves. They did, and are, bringing their districts much, much closer to the democratic ideal that all of us hold dear—truly high and equitable academic success for literally all children—and this substantial accomplishment should be recognized, respected, and researched so it

can be used to help other superintendents move other school districts farther along the road to equitable democracy.

### Notes

1. Funding for the project was provided by the Sid W. Richardson Foundation, a private foundation located in Ft. Worth, Texas.
2. The criterion score used by the Texas Education Agency for these measures is 1110 on SAT and 24 on ACT.
3. This test has a high level of difficulty; the percentage of all Texas students passing this test in 1999 was 43.4 (TEA, 1999a).
4. The Recommended High School program requires students to take a more rigorous set of courses than the minimum high-school program, including 4 credits of English, 3 credits of mathematics (Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II), 3 credits of science, 4 credits of social studies and economics, 2 credits of the same language other than English, and a variety of other coursework including speech, technology applications, physical education, fine arts, and electives in specialized areas (Title 19 Texas Administrative Code, [Part II](#), §74.12).

### References

- Berry, J., & Achilles, C. (1999). *The case for understanding a school district's influence on student outcomes*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Coleman, P., & LaRocque, L. (1990). *Struggling to be "good enough": Administrative practices and school district ethos*. London: Falmer.
- Edmonds, R.R. (1986). Characteristics of effective schools. In U. Neisser (Ed.), *The school achievement of minority children: New perspectives* (pp. 93–104). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Elmore, R.P., & Burney, D. (1997). *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City* (Report for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future). Klutztown, PA: Klutztown Publishing.
- Glass, T.E., Björk, L., & Brunner, C.C. (2000). *The 2000 study of the American school superintendency*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- Henig, J.R., Hula, R.C., Orr, M., & Pedescleaux, D.S. (1999). *The color of school reform: Race, politics, and the challenge of urban education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (1998). *The Black-White test score gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Lomotey, K. (1990). *Going to school: The African-American experience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- McDermott, R.P. (1997). Achieving school failure 1972–1997. In G.D. Spindler (Ed.), *Education and cultural process: Anthropological approaches* (pp. 110–35). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2000). Improving student performance: The role of district level staff. *Evaluation Brief*, 2(4). Retrieved January 3, 2003,

- from [\[http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/evaluation/evalbriefs/vol2n4-role.pdf\]](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/accountability/evaluation/evalbriefs/vol2n4-role.pdf)
- Oakes, J., Gamoran, A., & Page, R.N. (1992). Curriculum differentiation: Opportunities, outcomes, and meanings. In P.W.Jackson (Ed.). *Handbook of research on curriculum* (pp. 570–608). New York: Macmillan.
- Parker, L. (1993). Acquiring and using resources. In P.B.Forsyth & M.Tallerico (Eds.). *City schools: Leading the way* (pp. 178–210). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Petersen, G.J. (1999). Demonstrated actions of instructional leaders: An examination of five California superintendents. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* 7(18). Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n18.html>
- Puriefoy, W.D. (2000, Feb. 6). Education and race: School boards have critical roles to play. *School Board News*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://www.nsba.org/sbn/01-feb/020601-7.htm>
- Ragland, M.A., Asera, R., & Johnson, J.F. (1999). *Urgency, responsibility, efficacy: Preliminary findings of a study of high-performing Texas school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A.Dana Center.
- Riehl, C.J. (2000). The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: A review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research* 70(1), 55–81.
- Rowan, B., & Miskel, C.G. (1999). Institutional theory and the study of educational organizations. In J.Murphy & K.S.Louis (Eds.). *Handbook of research on educational administration* (2nd ed., pp. 359–83). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Skiba, R.J., Peterson, R.L., & Williams, T. (1997). Office referrals and suspension: Disciplinary intervention in middle schools. *Journal of Treatment of Children* 20(3), 295–315.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement-focused school districts*. Austin, TX: The Charles A.Dana Center.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (1994). *Academic Excellence Indicator System 1993–1994 state performance report*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/94/state.html>
- . (1999a). *Academic Excellence Indicator System 1998–1999 state performance report*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/99/state.html>
- . (1999b). *Snapshot: 1998–1999 school district profiles*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/snapshot/99/index.html>
- Valdés, G. (1998). The world outside and inside schools: Language and immigrant children. *Educational Researcher* 27(6), 4–18.
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.



# **CHAPTER 10**

## **Can State Accountability Systems Drive Improvements in School Performance for Children of Color and Children from Low-Income Homes?**

**EDWARD J.FULLER AND JOSEPH F.JOHNSON, JR.**

States and school districts throughout the nation have developed or are developing accountability systems to spur improvement in student achievement. Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners have both praised and criticized accountability systems, particularly concerning their impact on children of color and children from low-income homes. Do accountability systems harm the education of children of color and children from low-income homes or do these systems drive educational improvements for these students? Few state accountability systems have been in place long enough to help answer this question; however, the Texas public school accountability system has been in place for several years, providing a useful case for analyzing the impact of accountability systems on student achievement. Additionally, Texas is a useful case for study because of the wealth of disaggregated student achievement data available through the state education agency.

If the accountability system in Texas were driving improvements in student performance (particularly for children of color and children from low-income homes), one would expect to see substantial increases in student achievement over time on multiple measures of student performance including the state's Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). One would expect to see increases for children of color and children who meet low-income criteria. Furthermore, one would expect to see those increases result in a narrowing of the achievement gap when their performance is compared to that of White students and students with typical family incomes. One would expect the improvements to be a fair reflection of the performance of all students without the omission or exclusion of significant populations of students. Furthermore, one would hope that the results would represent real improvements in student achievement, as opposed to artificial indicators of success. Finally, if the accountability system were to be considered at least partly responsible for these changes in achievement, one would expect to see some evidence that the accountability system had prompted changes in schools and school districts that led to changes in student performance. This chapter examines these issues in an attempt to consider the extent to which the Texas school accountability system may have driven improvements in school performance for children of color and children from low-income homes.

## Changes in TAAS Performance in Texas Public Schools

Student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) has improved over the past several years. Furthermore, the gaps between the performances of different racial/ethnic/socioeconomic groups of students have diminished over time. The TAAS is a criterion-referenced test intended to measure student attainment of the state academic standards (the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills). The test has been administered to Texas students since 1991. Initially, it was administered in the fall at Grades 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11. Since 1994, the reading and mathematics portions of TAAS have been administered to Texas students in the spring at Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10. Similarly, a writing assessment has been administered to students at Grades 4, 8, and 10. For students in Grades 3 through 6, schools may choose to administer a Spanish version of the TAAS. Statewide results from both English and Spanish administrations show improvements in student performance.

### *English Version Results*

In 1994, 74% of all students tested (including those in special education) passed the TAAS reading assessment (see [Table 10.1](#)). Even more (85%) White students tested passed the assessment, yet only 58% of African-American students and 63% of Hispanic students passed the reading assessment. Among students categorized by the state as economically disadvantaged, 61% passed the reading assessment. Among students with limited English proficiency, only 39% passed.

By the year 2000, TAAS reading assessment results had improved considerably. In that year, 87% of all students tested passed the reading test. Furthermore, 80% of all African-American students and 81% of Hispanic students passed the assessment, compared to 94% of White students, 80% of students from low-income homes, and 60% of students with limited English proficiency. Performance on the writing assessment showed similar gains.

There was even more dramatic improvement in mathematics on TAAS over the same time period. In 1994 only 57% of all students tested passed the mathematics assessment, whereas 87% passed in 2000. The percentage of African-American students passing the mathematics assessment increased from 36% in 1994 to 76% in 2000. The percentage of Hispanic students passing increased from 45% in 1994 to 83% in 2000. The percentage of students meeting low-income criteria who passed increased from 43% in 1994 to 81% in 2000. Additionally, the percentage of students with limited English proficiency who passed the mathematics section of TAAS increased from 30% in 1994 to 69% in 2000.

**Table 10.1** Percentages of Students Passing the TAAS—English Version

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Gain
<i>All Students</i>								
Reading	74%	76%	77%	80%	83%	86%	87%	13 pts.
Writing	76%	79%	79%	82%	84%	88%	88%	12 pts.
Math	57%	63%	70%	76%	80%	85%	87%	30 pts.
<i>African American</i>								
Reading	58%	61%	64%	70%	74%	78%	80%	22 pts.
Writing	63%	68%	69%	72%	76%	81%	82%	19 pts.
Math	36%	42%	52%	60%	66%	72%	76%	40 pts.
<i>Hispanic</i>								
Reading	63%	65%	67%	71%	75%	80%	81%	18 pts.
Writing	67%	71%	71%	74%	77%	83%	82%	15 pts.
Math	45%	50%	60%	68%	73%	80%	83%	38 pts.
<i>White</i>								
Reading	85%	86%	86%	89%	91%	93%	94%	9 pts.
Writing	85%	87%	87%	89%	90%	93%	94%	9 pts.
Math	70%	76%	81%	85%	88%	92%	93%	23 pts.
<i>Econ. Disadv.</i>								
Reading	61%	64%	65%	70%	74%	78%	80%	19 pts.
Writing	65%	69%	69%	72%	75%	81%	81%	16 pts.
Math	43%	49%	58%	66%	71%	78%	81%	38 pts.
<i>Limited English</i>								
Reading	39%	42%	43%	49%	54%	59%	60%	21 pts.
Writing	44%	48%	47%	51%	54%	60%	60%	16 pts.
Math	30%	35%	44%	53%	59%	68%	69%	39 pts.

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2000a

### *Spanish Version Results*

In Grades 3 through 6, schools may administer a Spanish version of the TAAS assessments. Approximately 19,000 3rd-grade students take the Spanish version of TAAS, yet only 11,000 4th graders, 5,000 5th graders, and 1,200 6th graders take the Spanish version. When students gain proficiency in English, they take the English version of TAAS, thereby reducing the number of students who take the Spanish version. Since 1997, the percentage passing the Spanish version has increased substantially in reading at Grades 3 and 4 and in writing at Grade 4 (see [Table 10.2](#)). There have also been substantial increases in the percentages of students passing the Spanish version of the mathematics assessment.

TAAS summary results indicate that Texas students currently are demonstrating skills in writing, reading, and mathematics on the TAAS that they were not demonstrating in 1994. In particular, the results suggest that African-



**Table 10.2** Percentage of Students Passing the TAAS—Spanish Version

	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>
Grade 3 Reading	43%	64%	74%	75%
Grade 3 Math	51%	65%	74%	75%
Grade 4 Reading	36%	38%	46%	58%
Grade 4 Math	46%	57%	72%	76%
Grade 4 Writing		62%	67%	73%
Grade 5 Reading		49%	33%	52%
Grade 5 Math		55%	64%	75%
Grade 6 Reading		27%	29%	27%
Grade 6 Math		21%	25%	25%

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2000a

American students, Hispanic students, students from low-income homes, and students with limited English proficiency were much more likely to demonstrate expected academic skills in reading and writing on the TAAS in 2000 than in 1994. Moreover, the results indicate that African-American students and students with limited English proficiency were more than twice as likely to meet state expectations in mathematics in 2000 than in 1994.

In addition, passing rates suggest that the performance gap between White students and students of color has diminished. In 1994, there was a 24-percentage-point gap between the pass rates of White students and African-American students on the TAAS mathematics assessment. In 2000, the performance gap had decreased to 17 points. In 1994, there was an 11-percentage-point gap between the pass rates of White students and Hispanic students on the TAAS reading assessment. In 2000, the gap had diminished to only six points.

One might wonder if the decrease in the gap is at least partially influenced by ceiling effects. Given that the percentage of White students passing the assessment is approaching 100%, one might argue that the TAAS may not be measuring the full level of academic attainment of White students, making the performance gap look smaller than it actually is. Therefore, Treisman and Fuller (2001) examined the performance gap by considering student performance on the Texas Learning Index (a scale score of TAAS performance). When they compared the Texas Learning Index scores of the different demographic groups of Texas students, they found that the gap between average scale scores has decreased substantially in recent years. Not only is there a much higher likelihood in 2000 than in 1994 that children of color and children from low-income homes will pass TAAS, there is also a much higher likelihood that children of color and children from low-income homes will demonstrate a level

of proficiency on TAAS comparable to their White, higher-income peers. In 2000, it is much more difficult to predict student performance on TAAS based on race or socioeconomic variables than it was in 1994.

### **Changes in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Performance in Texas Public Schools**

Often referred to as the “Nation’s Report Card,” the NAEP is the only nationally representative assessment of student knowledge and skills in mathematics, science, and language arts. The state-level tests are administered at the 4th- and 8th-grade levels at various points in time. The NAEP is authorized by Congress and directed by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education.

The goal of the NAEP is to collect, analyze, and present reliable and valuable information about what U.S. students know and can do. Both public and private school students in Grades 4 and 8 are sampled and assessed on a regular basis in core subject areas. All NAEP assessments are based on content frameworks and are developed through a national consensus process that involves teachers, curriculum experts, parents, and members of the general public.

#### *NAEP Mathematics*

In mathematics, the NAEP was administered to 4th-grade students in 1992 and 1996 and to 8th-grade students in 1990, 1992, and 1996. Each student demographic group in each state achieves a scale score that ranges from 0 to 500. Thus, one can use NAEP scale scores to compare the performance of various demographic groups both within and between states.

Based on the rankings of states’ average scale scores (see [Table 10.3](#)), Texas students have made tremendous progress in their mathematics knowledge and skills as measured by NAEP. This is especially true for Texas 4th-grade students. Indeed, Texas African-American and White 4th graders rank first in the nation and Texas Hispanic 4th graders rank sixth in the nation, behind five states with very small percentages of Hispanic students. In addition, Texas 4th-grade students had the greatest increase in overall mathematics scale scores, while African-American, Hispanic, and White 4th graders had the 2nd, 7th, and 1st greatest increases in scale scores, respectively. Texas 8th-grade students had the second greatest increase in overall mathematics scale scores, while African-American, Hispanic, and White 8th graders had the 6th-, 10th-, and 3rd-greatest increases in scale scores respectively.

Comparing Texas to other large states is illuminating. The test-taking populations of the four most populous states are quite similar. However, the test results are strikingly different (see [Table 10.4](#)). Texas 4th- and 8th-grade students perform far better than their peers in other large, diverse states.

**Table 10.3** Texas Grade 4 and 8 NAEP Mathematics Rankings

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>All Students</b>	<b>African American</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>
4th	Number of Participating States (1992/1996)	42 / 44	36 / 37	42 / 44	42 / 44
4th	1992	18th	9th	12th	12 <sup>th</sup>
4th	1996	6th	1st	6th	1 <sup>st</sup>
8th	Number of Participating States (1990 / 1992 / 1996)	36 / 42 / 44	28 / 36 / 37	35 / 42 / 44	36 / 42 / 44
8th	1990	22nd	16th	10th	12 <sup>th</sup>
8th	1992	21st	15th	11th	14 <sup>th</sup>
8th	1996	21st	4th	8th	9 <sup>th</sup>

Note: rankings based on comparison of state average scale scores  
 Data: Reese, Miller, Mazzeo, & Dossey. 1997; Analysis: Edward J.Fuller

Grissmer and Flanagan (2001) analyzed NAEP mathematics scores for both 4th- and 8th-grade students. In their analysis, they controlled for student background characteristics, test participation rates, and special education and limited English proficiency exemption rates. They found that Texas had one of the largest gains in mathematics performance. Moreover, Reese, Miller, Mazzeo, and Dossey (1997) found that Texas was the *only* state to have statistically significant increases in 4th- and 8th-grade NAEP mathematics scale scores from 1992 to 1996 for African-American, Hispanic, White, rural, urban, and suburban students. These data indicate substantial improvements in elementary mathematics performance on the NAEP for Texas children, particularly for children of color and children from low-income homes.

### NAEP Reading

As with TAAS achievement, Texas reading achievement on the NAEP is less impressive than the mathematics achievement on NAEP. Texas 4th-grade students had an average scale score slightly above the national average and the 13th-greatest scale score among all participating states (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). When the data are disaggregated, however, Texas African-American, Hispanic, and White students had average scale scores that ranked 7th, 6th, and 2nd respectively (see Table 10.5). In addition, each of these scores was above the national average for their respective demographic groups, especially for African-American and Hispanic students. The NAEP reading performance of Texas 8th-grade Hispanic students ranked 2nd in the nation.

**Table 10.4** Rankings of Four Largest States on 1996 NAEP Grade 4 Mathematics

	Texas		California		Florida		New York		Number of Participant States
	Gr	Gr	Gr	Gr	Gr	Gr	Gr	Gr	
African American	4	8	4	8	4	8	4	8	37
Hispanic	1st	4 <sup>th</sup>	36 <sup>th</sup>	24 <sup>th</sup>	32 <sup>nd</sup>	25 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	44
White	6 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	39 <sup>th</sup>	23 <sup>rd</sup>	22 <sup>nd</sup>	17 <sup>th</sup>	30 <sup>th</sup>	26 <sup>th</sup>	44
Title I Participants	1st	9 <sup>th</sup>	41 <sup>st</sup>	21 <sup>st</sup>	26 <sup>th</sup>	23 <sup>rd</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	14 <sup>th</sup>	44
	1st	10 <sup>th</sup>	42 <sup>nd</sup>	22 <sup>nd</sup>	22 <sup>nd</sup>	26 <sup>th</sup>	26 <sup>th</sup>	29 <sup>th</sup>	44

Note: rankings based on comparison of state average scale scores

Data Source: Reese, Miller, Mazzeo, & Dossey, 1997; Analysis: Edward J. Fuller

**Table 10.5** Texas Grade 4 and 8 NAEP Reading Rankings

<b>Year</b>	<b>All Students</b>	<b>African American</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>White</b>
Number of States Participating in Grade 4 Assessment (1992 / 1994 / 1998)	37 / 36 / 40	31 / 30 / 35	35 / 35 / 40	37 / 36 / 40
Grade 4 / 1992	21st	9th	11th	11 <sup>th</sup>
Grade 4 / 1994	23rd	9th	9th	5 <sup>th</sup>
Grade 4 1998	13th	7th	6th	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Number of States Participating in Grade 8 Assessment (1998)	36	30	33	36
Grade 8 / 1998	16th	11th	2nd	6 <sup>th</sup>

Data Source: Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Analysis: Edward J.Fuller

### *NAEP Science*

The only administration of the NAEP science assessment was in 1996 for Grade 8 students; thus, no comparable data is available to discern a trend. Unlike mathematics and reading, science achievement in Texas is only about average on the NAEP. Overall, Texas average scale scores in science were slightly below average, although there was no statistical difference between the Texas and the U.S. score (O'Sullivan, Reese, & Mazzeo, 1997). The state ranking for Texas was 26th out of the 40 participating states. The disaggregated data, however, provides a slightly more positive picture for Texas students. Specifically, Texas Grade 8 African-American, Hispanic, and White students ranked 7th, 19th, and 10th respectively. Texas African-American scores were statistically greater than the national average while the Texas scores for Hispanic and White students were not statistically different from the national average.

### *NAEP Writing*

As with science, there has only been one state-level NAEP administration at Grade 8 in writing. Thus, again, it is impossible to discern a trend. Overall, Texas average scale scores in writing were 3<sup>rd</sup> in the nation and statistically greater than the national average (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). Again, the disaggregated data provides an even more positive picture for Texas students. Specifically, Texas Grade 8 African-American, Hispanic, and White students ranked 1st, 2nd, and 2nd respectively. All of the scores were statistically greater than the national average. Clearly, Texas students excelled in writing compared to their peers across the country.

### *NAEP Summary*

If the Texas accountability system is doing harm to the educational attainment of children of color, then how does one explain the performance of Texas students relative to students in other states, especially other large and diverse states? If the TAAS has resulted in a lower quality of instruction for African-American and Hispanic students, then how does one explain the performance of these students on a broader and arguably more rigorous assessment, such as the NAEP? Even though the NAEP performance of children of color and children from low-income homes in Texas is still unjustifiably less than the performance of their White and more affluent peers, these NAEP data deserve our careful consideration.

### **Other Indicators of Change in Texas Student Performance**

If TAAS and NAEP are appropriate indicators of change in student performance in Texas, one would expect to see changes in other measures of academic performance. For instance, are there changes in the number of Texas students taking Advanced Placement (AP) examinations? In particular, are there changes in the number of African-American and Hispanic children taking AP examinations? Similarly, one might expect to see changes in the performance of Texas students on college entrance examinations such as the SAT.

### *Advanced Placement Test Taking*

One of the criticisms levied at the accountability system in Texas is that the system results in African-American and Hispanic students being tracked into TAAS remediation classes rather than college preparation classes. The available data on Advanced Placement test taking refutes this contention (The College Board and Educational Testing Service, 1993a, 1994a, 1995a, 1996a, 1997a, 1998a, 1999a, 2000a). The percentage of African-American and Hispanic juniors and seniors taking at least one Advanced Placement examination has increased dramatically from the year before the adoption of the accountability system (1992–93) to the year 2000. The percentage of African-American students in Texas taking at least one Advanced Placement examination has increased 423.3% since the 1992–93 year. This is more than four times the rate of increase for all other states. The percentage of Hispanic students taking at least one Advanced Placement examination has increased 306.1% since the 1992–93 year. This is almost twice the rate of increase for all other states. On the other hand, it is important to note that the number of Texas students taking Advanced Placement examinations is still low. There is still much room for improvement. Nonetheless, these data do not support the contention that TAAS has reduced the number of children of color who are accessing more rigorous courses.

**Table 10.6** Increase in Students Taking the SAT

Percentage Increase in the Number of College-Bound Seniors Taking the SAT (1993–2000)	Percentage Increase in Number of Texas Public School Seniors		
	US—w/o TX	Texas	Texas
All Students	19	30	3
African American	15	34	2
Hispanic	23	35	4
White	7	14	2
Other	59	92	16

Note: rankings based on comparison of state average scale scores

Source: College Board and Educational Testing Service, 1993b, 1993c, 1994b, 1994c, 1995b, 1995c, 1996b, 1996c, 1997b, 1997c, 1998b, 1998c, 1999b, 1999c, 2000b, 2000c.

### *College Entrance Examinations*

SAT and ACT scores are a common measure of the quality of high schools. However, not every high-school graduate takes these college entrance examinations, thus participation rates vary dramatically between schools and states. Consequently, as The College Board and Educational Testing Service notes, these varying participation rates render meaningless most comparison of schools or states based on SAT/ACT scores.

We can, however, examine the trends in the number of students taking the SAT in Texas as well as the average SAT score in Texas. (Most graduating seniors in Texas take the SAT rather than the ACT.) According to College Board data (The College Board and Educational Testing Service, 1993b, 1993c, 1994b, 1994c, 1995b, 1995c, 1996b, 1996c, 1997b, 1997c, 1998b, 1998c, 1999b, 1999c, 2000b, 2000c), the number of Texas public high-school seniors taking the SAT increased by 30% from 1993 to 2000 (see [Table 10.6](#)). Over the same time period, Texas Education Agency (TEA) data show that the number of 12th-grade students increased by just 3%. Thus, a far greater percentage of Texas public school students took the SAT in 2000 than in 1993, the year before the accountability system was implemented. Furthermore, the increases in percentages of students taking the SAT from 1993 to 2000 exceed the increase in test takers nationally for all demographic groups of students.

Unfortunately, the average SAT scores for public-school students reported by the TEA have not been re-normed. Thus, the scores from 1993 through 1995 are not directly comparable to those from 1996 through 1998. However, from 1993 through 1998, the average SAT score increased between 5 and 10 points for all students, African-American students, Hispanic students, and White students. From 1996 through 1998, the average SAT score decreased by 1 point for all students and decreased by 4 points for African-American and Hispanic students.

The average SAT score for White students increased by 2 points over the same time period.

It is difficult to know if this decrease is due to a lower quality of education between 1996 and 1998 or to the possibility that students with a broader range of skills and abilities were being tested in 1998 than in 1996. As the College Board notes, as the percentage of test-takers increase, average scores typically decrease since the larger pool of test takers might typically include students who would previously have been excluded from taking the test.

### **Issues with the Evidence of Change in Texas Student Performance**

Although the improvements in student performance as measured by TAAS, NAEP, and other measures have been generally impressive, researchers and other critics have pointed to a variety of issues that call into question the depth and breadth of the improvements. These issues include concern about the number of students exempted from assessments, the extent to which teachers are teaching the test, and concern about drop-outs.

#### *Exemptions from Assessment*

In Texas, over 450,000 students (about 12% of all students) receive special education because of disabilities that influence their learning (TEA, 1998a). Furthermore, approximately 13% of all students come from homes in which the primary language is other than English (TEA, 1998b). Texas, like many states, has struggled to determine how to assess the learning of these students. In particular, there has been concern about the number and percentage of students who are not included in the assessment process.

In 1999, 89.3 % of Texas students in Grades 3 through 8 and in Grade 10 took the TAAS (see [Table 10.7](#)). Of the students who did not take the examination, 0.7% were absent for the test's administration, 6.9% were exempted because of special education issues, 2.2% were exempted because of limited English proficiency, and 0.9% did not take the test for other reasons. There is some variation in the percentages of demographic groups of students who took TAAS in 1999, ranging from 84.1% of students from low-income homes, 85.4% of Hispanic students, 86.6% of African-American students, and 93.4% of White students (TEA, 2000b).

Although the percentage of students excluded from the testing is small, it should be noted that there has been a decrease in the percentage of students taking the test. This is due to a change in policy that occurred in 1998. Previously, if a student who received special education services took the TAAS, the results of that student's test were not included in the determination of the school's accountability rating. In an effort to make schools more accountable for the improvement of achievement of students with disabilities, this policy was changed beginning with



**Table 10.7** Percentage of Students Taking the TAAS

	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>
All Students	89.6%	90.6%	91.1%	89.3%
African American	88.4%	88.4%	88.5%	86.6%
Hispanic	83.6%	86.2%	87.2%	85.4%
White	94.6%	94.8%	95.0%	93.4%
Econ. Disadv.	83.6%	85.6%	86.4%	84.1%

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2000b

the 1998–99 school year. In that year, the scores of students with disabilities were included in determining school and school-district accountability ratings, along with the scores of other students. Schools had previously been able to either exempt students with disabilities from taking the assessment or allow them to take the test, without risk of negative consequences to the school’s accountability rating. In the spring of 1999, schools had to either exempt students with disabilities or give them the TAAS. If students with disabilities took the TAAS, it counted toward the school’s accountability rating. Therefore, schools chose to exempt slightly more students. However, it should be noted that the percentage of students tested in 1999 under the more stringent policy was almost equal to the percentage tested in 1996 with the more lenient policy. More importantly, *the percentage of students included in the state’s accountability determinations has increased from 74% in 1996 to 84.2% in 1999.*

Some Texas students continue to be exempted from TAAS. There are difficult issues surrounding the assessment of special populations of students with which Texas continues to grapple, like many other states. Nonetheless, the exemption rates neither explain nor discredit the substantial change in student performance.

### *Drop-outs*

The drop-out rate in Texas is unacceptably high, especially for African-American and Hispanic youth. One of the most frequently heard criticisms of the Texas accountability system is that the “high stakes” graduation test causes students to drop out of school. The creators of the Texas accountability system attempted to prevent this problem by including a provision in the school rating system that focused on drop-out rates. Secondary schools in Texas can be rated as low-performing schools if they have high annual drop-out rates, even if they achieve outstanding performance on TAAS. Furthermore, a school’s accountability rating can be lowered solely because of the annual drop-out rate for one racial/ethnic group of students. Among the Texas high schools listed as low-performing campuses in 2000, many acquired that designation because of their drop-out rate, not because of TAAS performance (TEA, 2000a).

Unfortunately, the drop-out problem remains. Perhaps, part of the reason for the problem has been in the method of counting drop-outs in Texas. For example, in their definition of drop-out, the TEA excludes students who were expelled for criminal behavior or who obtain a GED. Many people would suggest that both of these types of students should be categorized as drop-outs. Another large issue is in the extent to which schools are given latitude to count or not to count students as drop-outs. For instance, if a district can document that a student returned to their home country or moved to another state, then the districts can designate such students as movers rather than drop-outs. While in theory such exclusions make sense, more than a few districts may have used the “out of country” designation quite liberally as a way to reduce their drop-out numbers. Thus, the annual drop-out rates reported by TEA (as collected from Texas schools) are typically lower than the drop-out rates reported by other entities. Whereas the Texas accountability system may have been intended to promote increased graduation rates, they may have instead promoted more creative drop-out accounting in some schools.

Still, the question remains, “Has TAAS led to a higher drop-out rate?” It is a difficult question to answer because of the inconsistencies in strategies used to calculate drop-out data. For instance, the TEA reported drop-out rate is for students in Grades 7 through 12. Since most students drop out in high school, the TEA calculation of the annual drop-out rate seriously underestimated the high-school drop-out rate. In fact, in 1996–97 the TEA Grade 7 through 12 annual drop-out rate was reported as 1.6% while the TEA sent the NCES an annual Grade 9 through 12 drop-out rate of 3.6%.

Other analyses have flaws that may be prone to an overestimate of the extent of the drop-out problem. For instance the Intercultural Development and Research Association (IDRA), calculates an attrition rate (Johnson, 1999) rather than a drop-out rate. The attrition rate formula assumes that all classes grow at the same rate. The attrition rate measure does not account for possible legitimate reasons for changes in enrollment such as the migration in and out of the state and districts, grade retention, movement in and out of non-public school settings, and student incarcerations, hospitalizations, and deaths. Finally, stating that students were “lost” due to attrition is inaccurate. As the TEA data show, approximately 7% of the student cohorts ending in 1996–97 and 1997–98 were continuing in school (TEA, 1998d). While they did not graduate in four years, they were still working on graduating when an attrition rate formula would have assumed that they dropped out of school.

In the case of NCES data, most of the analyses use Census Bureau data that count the number of people between 18 and 24 with and without a high-school diploma. The major problem with such data is obvious. A 20-year-old person residing in Texas in 1999 and reporting that he or she did not complete high school could have dropped out of school in any state or country in the world besides Texas. A large number of Mexican citizens enter the United States to find work. Many of these job hunters are under the age of 24, but never finished

high school in Mexico and never attended school in the United States. This artificially increases the apparent “dropout rate” as reported by NCES. In fact, quick review of the NCES data shows that all of the states along the Texas-Mexico border have “drop-out rates” that far exceed the national average.

As with the other analyses of drop-outs in Texas, the analysis by Walter Haney (*Preliminary Report on Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Exit Test*, 2000) of Boston College is also flawed. To review his arguments, Haney claims that the percentage of public-school students in Texas completing high school dropped precipitously with the adoption of the TAAS examination as a graduation requirement. To begin, Haney uses enrollment and graduation data gathered by the TEA to estimate the 4-year progression or drop-out rate in Texas. To do so, Haney takes the number of high-school graduates in a particular year and divides that number by the number of 9th-grade students from 3 years earlier. He does not control for either the in-migration of students to the Texas education system, nor does he control for the out-migration of students from the Texas education system. Specifically, he is unable to track students moving from one school to another between states or countries, nor is he able to track students moving to and from private schools and home-schooling situations. Clearly, this prevents his data from being entirely accurate. To see the problem with such an analysis, one only has to employ the same methodology with Grade 9 students and Grade 6 students from three years earlier. Such an analysis results in a negative drop-out rate.

Even if one accepts that the number of students moving in and out of the system is small, and therefore the analysis is fairly accurate, there are still several problems with his analysis. First, Haney attributes a large drop in the progression rate in the 1990–91 academic year to the adoption of the Exit TAAS as a graduation requirement. What Haney fails to mention is that the graduating class of 1991 was not subject to the Exit TAAS graduation requirement, but was only required to pass the “easier” TEAMS test. In fact, the first graduating class required to pass the Exit TAAS was the class of 1993. From 1978 to 1999, the greatest increase in the progression rate was between the 1991–92 and 1992–93 academic years. If one wants to draw causal connections from a simple line graph, then the conclusion would clearly be that the adoption of the Exit TAAS test as a graduation requirement actually *increased* the percentage of students who graduated.

Second, prior to the 1989–90 academic year, enrollment and graduation data were collected through a paper submission from school districts to the TEA. The only method TEA could use to verify the counts was to actually send a team of auditors to each school and district to ensure accuracy. With over 7,000 schools and 1,050 school districts dispersed over a large state, this was simply not possible. Starting with the 1989–90 school year, the data submission was collected electronically. As both TEA and district personnel will attest, the data collected through the paper submission was fraught with error. In Haney’s methodology, the progression rates for the 1989–90, 1990–91, and 1991–92

academic years compared the number of graduates according to electronic submissions to the number of students enrolled in 9th grade according to paper submissions. An analysis of the data shows that the most volatility in the entire analysis occurs precisely during this time period. There certainly is the possibility that the volatility was due largely to differences in the accuracy of the different types of data submission rather than another cause. Yet, Haney has ignored this possibility in his discussions of his analysis.

Finally, it is important to note three points. First, Martin Carnoy of Stanford and his colleagues (Carnoy, Loeb, & Smith, 2000) have also used the same data set to analyze drop-outs in Texas and concluded that the accountability system appeared to have no effect on the drop-out rate in Texas for students from any demographic group. Second, neither Haney nor any other scholar has published a *statistical* analysis of the change in graduation, progression, or drop-out rates from one year to the next in Texas. Until statistical analyses and a large body of qualitative work identify a causal connection between the Exit TAAS and dropping out of school, any talk of a causal connection is pure conjecture. Finally, there has been no analysis of the progression rates for other states or the nation. Perhaps the economic recession or some other factor common to the entire nation or a certain set of states influenced the drop-out rate. Without such analyses, one cannot conclude that the trend in the drop-out rate in Texas looks different from the trend in any other state over the same time period.

Perhaps the most accurate data on the number of drop-outs in Texas is the current completion rate analysis conducted by the TEA. Even this calculation, however, is not entirely accurate. In that analysis, the TEA tracks students electronically from one year to the next using each student's unique identification number. At the end of each academic year, the TEA analyzes how many students from each Grade 9 to Grade 12 cohort have graduated with a diploma, have obtained a GED, are still enrolled in school, or have dropped out of school. With the exception of students who died, transferred to another school, or returned home to another country, all students are included in the analysis. As [Table 10.8](#) shows, the percentage of students who completed or who are completing high school (obtained a diploma, obtained a GED, or remained in school) has increased each year from the 1993–94 academic year to the 1997–98 academic year. Without a doubt, African-American and Hispanic students have lower completion rates, but the rates have increased over time. Unfortunately, this analysis does not extend far enough back in time to analyze if the rates fluctuated after the adoption of the TAAS graduation requirement. As explained above, there is not compelling evidence that the drop-out problem has become larger since the development of the TAAS; however, the question remains, “Why are so many Texas youth dropping out of school?” Are students dropping out because of the TAAS? Despite much of the rhetoric surrounding the exit-level TAAS and drop-outs in Texas, the Exit test is not the only graduation requirement. All Texas public-school students must meet three requirements to graduate with a diploma: state and district requirements for attendance, state and

**Table 10.8** Texas Public High School Student Completion Rates from 1993–94 to 1997–98

	1993– 1994	1994– 1995	1995– 1996	1996– 1997	1997– 1998	Change 94–98
All Students	85.3	87.7	89.3	90.7	91.4	6.1
White	91.2	92.8	93.8	94.5	94.9	3.7
African American	79.0	82.4	85.5	87.2	88.5	9.5
Hispanic	78.3	81.4	83.4	85.6	86.9	8.6

Source: Texas Education Agency, 1997a, 1998a

district requirements for course completion, and minimum expectations on all three sub-tests of the Exit TAAS. Each of these requirements influences the extent to which students drop out of school.

Unfortunately, there is no statewide accurate count of the number of students who successfully complete all required classes and meet attendance requirements, but still cannot graduate because of failure to pass the Exit TAAS. There are, however, several sources of data that shed some light on this problem.

One important source of data is an annual survey of school district personnel. In this survey, district personnel are asked for the reasons that students drop out of school. For each of the years data was collected, the most common reason listed for students dropping out was poor grades. (TEA, 1997a, 1998a) Failure to pass the Exit TAAS ranked 9th, 8th, and 8th for the 1994–95, 1995–96, and 1996–97 academic years, respectively. The respective percentages are 2.7, 3.2, and 1.8. In comparison, “poor attendance” ranked first in all 3 years and the respective percentages were 46.3, 45.0, and 45.0. This data suggests that far more students are dropping out because of poor attendance than because they did not pass the Exit TAAS.

Another source of data is the number of students identified as not having passed the Exit TAAS from the TEA’s “leaver record” on students leaving a district. Each Texas district is required to provide a reason for leaving for every student who leaves the district. While one could argue that districts may have an incentive to “game” the system when reporting their numbers, the fact that the TEA rated several districts “low-performing” for inaccurate or incomplete leaver record data provides a serious incentive for districts to accurately report on the dispositions of their students. One leaver record code is “Completed, no TAAS.” In other words, districts can report that a student completed all requirements except passing the Exit TAAS. In 1996–97, only 1,856 students received this code and in 1997–98, 2,604 students received this code. (TEA, 1997a, 1998a) While this is seemingly a large number of students, it represents about eight tenths of 1% of the number of 9th-grade students enrolled 3 years earlier.

There is no doubt that the drop-out rate in Texas is unacceptably high, especially for African-American and Hispanic students. There is no reliable evidence, however, that the high drop-out rates are related to the testing and accountability system. In theory, one would expect some percentage of students to drop out whenever standards are raised, but there is no research that has isolated the effect of adopting a graduation test and accountability system on students dropping out of school.

### **Role of the Accountability System in Changes in Student Achievement**

There have been positive changes in the achievement of Texas students as measured by the TAAS, NAEP, and some other indicators of academic success. The positive change has been particularly pronounced for students of color and students from low-income homes. The improvements in performance cannot be attributed simply to exemption rates, easy state tests, or drop-out rates. When examining whether or not accountability systems can drive improvements in achievement, then, the next question is, "Have the changes in student performance been driven by the state accountability system or by other factors?"

Determining causal relationships is always challenging in a field as complex as education and especially when one is examining an entity as broad and diverse as Texas. Certainly, there are many factors that have combined to influence improved achievement in Texas public schools. Some of these factors include the efforts to equalize funding for Texas schools, the provision of preschool education to many children from low-income homes, the reduction in classroom size to a 22 to 1 ratio in kindergarten through Grade 4, the provision of technical assistance and support through a network of education service centers and centers for educator development, and increased flexibility from state regulation. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how Texas schools could have attained their current level of performance without any one of these critical factors. These factors have been particularly important to efforts to improve the achievement of children of color and children from low-income homes.

While acknowledging a multitude of important factors, it is important, however, to note that the state accountability played a central, catalytic role in driving the improvements that have led to the student achievement results described throughout this paper. The best evidence of this central, catalytic role comes from a study of four Texas school districts (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000) that have made substantial improvements in the achievement of children of color and children from low-income homes.

Skrla et al. (2000) found that superintendents, school board members, and other district leaders pointed to the Texas accountability system as a catalyst for their improvement efforts. In particular, these leaders reported that the accountability system caused them to re-think what could be done to help children of color learn. As one central office administrator reported:

I think state accountability has been a good thing.... I think it's unfortunate that it took that [the state accountability system] to have to accomplish what should be accomplished anyway. There is no doubt in my mind that this district would not be where it is without it because we suddenly decided we were not where we needed to be and that we were going to get there.

The reason the accountability system has served as such a catalyst probably has less to do with testing and more to do with the manner in which the test results are used. In Texas, schools are rated as "low-performing," "acceptable," "recognized," or "exemplary." Whole districts are given similar ratings. To date, the ratings have been based on three factors: student attendance, drop-out rates, and the percentage of students passing the reading, mathematics, and writing sections of TAAS. However, the dropout and TAAS passing rates are not simply examined in the aggregate. Instead, the rates for African-American, Hispanic, and White students are disaggregated and examined separately, along with the rates for students who meet the state's "economically disadvantaged" criteria. A school's rating is based on the performance of the lowest achieving group. Similarly, a district's rating is based on the performance of the lowest achieving group.

For example, in order to earn an acceptable rating in 2000, schools had to have 50% of their students passing each section of TAAS. As well, 50% of the African-American students, 50% of the Hispanic students, 50% of the White students, and 50% of the students receiving free- or reduced-price lunch had to pass each section. Thus, a school that perhaps was getting 80% of their total student body to pass the mathematics section of TAAS, but only got 40% of their Hispanic students to pass that section would have earned a low-performing rating.

The rating system communicates clearly to educators that all groups of students must be educated to meet the state's standards. Furthermore, the rating system communicates to the entire community a clear message about which children are and are not being educated. In each of the four districts Skrla et al. (2000) studied there were local catalysts (parent groups, advocacy groups, business leaders, judges presiding over desegregation orders) who used the results of the accountability system to focus district attention on the need to improve instruction for students who had not been served well.

Furthermore, the accountability system has given districts a substantial amount of data with which they can gauge their efforts to improve teaching and learning. Each of the four districts studied supplemented the data provided by the state with additional data used to ensure that all groups of students were making measurable progress toward the state's academic expectations. Often these districts shaped the flow of fiscal, human, and material resources in ways that responded to the needs identified through state and local achievement data. As another central office administrator explained:

Accountability has made people more responsible.... And you know, it's made us turn our attention toward meeting the needs of all those kids. It's really just raised our level of awareness.... And when we first started looking very carefully at the accountability system, suddenly everybody realized the need for staff development. So we have used that as the impetus to make changes.

Of course, not all school districts have used the Texas accountability system as constructively or proficiently as the four in the study. However, an earlier study of 10 Texas districts (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999) found that district leaders were making similar uses of the state accountability system to help drive improvements throughout their districts. These studies show how district leaders believed that the state accountability system changed their expectations, changed their behavior, and ultimately changed their school systems.

### **Conclusion**

Using the example of Texas, we have explored the question, "Can state accountability systems drive improvements in the school performance of children of color and children from low-income homes?" Data from TAAS, NAEP, Advanced Placement course taking patterns, and college entrance examinations indicate that Texas students have indeed made gains, and in some areas, impressive gains. Even though there are important concerns about exemption rates, test rigor, and drop-out rates, the bottom line remains that there have been important academic gains, especially for children of color and children from low-income homes in Texas. Qualitative studies are showing that leaders in districts that have made the greatest gains are pointing to the state accountability system as a major force in driving their efforts to improve the learning of all students, especially children of color and children from low-income homes. The nature of the testing system is probably not the salient factor of the state accountability system. Instead, the power of the system is more likely tied to the structure of the rating system, the use of disaggregated data, and the mandate that districts get substantial percentages of each demographic group of students to achieve state expectations.

So, put simply, "Yes, state accountability systems can drive improvements in school performance for children of color and children from low-income homes." However, this does not imply that the Texas system is perfect. It is not. Nor does it imply that all accountability systems will drive improvement in student achievement. They will not. It does imply that state accountability systems deserve more rigorous study by all those who are concerned about the education of children of color and children from low-income homes. It implies that we should not allow our suspicion of testing programs and our distrust of state government to keep us from exploring how state accountability schools can be a powerful tool for generating greater equity and excellence in student achievement.



Most importantly, it compels us to not look upon the Texas system or any other state accountability system as either good or bad. Rather, it should encourage us to diligently study the nuances of such systems so that we might learn how to build upon the positive results in Texas, minimize the negatives, and improve teaching and learning for all students throughout this nation.

## References

- Carnoy, M., Loeb, S., & Smith, T.L. (2000, March). *Do higher test scores in Texas make for better high school outcomes?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- College Board and Educational Testing Service. (1993a). *1993 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (1993b). *1993 college-bound seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (1993c). *1993 college-bound seniors: Texas report*. New York: Author.
- . (1994a). *1994 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (1994b). *1994 college-bound seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (1994c). *1994 college-bound seniors: Texas report*. New York: Author.
- . (1995a). *1995 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (1995b). *1995 college-bound seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (1995c). *1995 college-bound seniors: Texas report*. New York: Author.
- . (1996a). *1996 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (1996b). *1996 college-bound seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (1996c). *1996 college-bound seniors: Texas report*. New York: Author.
- . (1997a). *1997 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (1997b). *1997 college-bound seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (1997c). *1997 college-bound Seniors: Texas Report*. New York: Author.
- . (1998a). *1998 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (1998b). *1998 college-bound Seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (1998c). *1998 college-bound seniors: Texas report*. New York: Author.
- . (1999a). *1999 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (1999b). *1999 college-bound seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (1999c). *1999 college-bound seniors: Texas report*. New York: Author.
- . (2000a). *2000 AP Texas and national summary reports*. New York: Author.
- . (2000b). *2000 college-bound seniors: National report*. New York: Author.
- . (2000c). *2000 college-bound seniors: Texas report*. New York: Author.
- Donahue, P.L., Voelkl, K.E., Campbell, J.R., & Mazzeo, J. (1999). *NAEP 1998 reading report card for the nations and states*. Washington, D.C.: NCES.
- Greenwald, E.A., Persky, H.R., Campbell, J.R., & Mazzeo, J. (1999). *NAEP 1998 writing: Report card for the nation and the states*. Washington, D.C.: NCES.
- Grissmer, D., & Flanagan, A. (2001). *Searching for indirect evidence for the effects of state-wide reforms*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Johnson, R. (1999). Attrition rates in Texas public high schools still high. *Intercultural Development Research Association Newsletter*, 26(9), 2–3, 8–18.
- O’Sullivan, C.Y., Reese, C.M., & Mazzeo, J. (1997). *NAEP 1996 science report card for the nation and the states*. Washington, D.C.: NCES.

- Preliminary report on Texas Assessment of Academic Skills Exit Test (TAAS-X), GI Forum v. Texas Education Agency*, 87 F. Supp. 2d 667 (W.D. Texas, 2000) (testimony of Walter Haney).
- Ragland, M., Asera, R., & Johnson, J. F. (1999). *Urgency, responsibility, efficacy*. Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center.
- Reese, C.M., Miller, K.E., Mazzeo, J., & Dossey, J.A. (1997). *NAEP 1996 mathematics report card for the nation and the states*. Washington, D.C.: NCES.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement-focused school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A. Dana Center.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA) (1997a). *1995–96 report on public school drop-outs*. Austin, TX: Author.
- . (1997b). *Student performance results, 1996–97*. Austin, TX: Author.
- . (1998a). *Policy research: Expanding the scope of the Texas public school accountability system*. Austin, Texas: Author.
- . (1998b). *Policy research: Academic achievement of elementary students with limited English proficiency in Texas public schools*. Austin, TX: Author.
- . (1998c). *Student performance results, 1997–98*. Austin, TX: Author.
- . (1998d). *1996–97 Report on public school drop-outs*. Austin, TX: Author.
- . (2000a). *Student performance results 1999–2000*. Austin, TX: Author.
- . (2000b). *Statewide TAAS participation rates*. Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment>.
- Treisman, U., & Fuller, E. (2001). *Searching for evidence of the effectiveness of systemic education reform*. Unpublished manuscript.



# CHAPTER 11

## **Accountability and Educational Equity in the Transformation of an Urban District**

JAMES W.KOSCHORECK

In the fall of 1999, I began to work as part of a research team that was assembled to explore the effects of district leadership on academic outcomes with low-income children and children of color. During the course of that project, I was able to interview a considerable number of central office personnel, administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members in four districts in Texas that were experiencing remarkable levels of successful achievement with African American and Latino children. That study focused on identifying the best practices in four school districts across the state: Aldine Independent School District (ISD), Brazosport ISD, San Benito Consolidated Independent School District (CISD), and Wichita Falls ISD. The explicit objective of the project was to learn how certain districts in the state of Texas are managing to achieve high levels of performance with low-income children of color and to disseminate the findings to key organizations and persons in hopes of effecting statewide reform quickly and efficiently.

While I acknowledge that the plan to identify the best practices across several school districts represents a legitimate approach given the objective of bringing about statewide educational reform, I feel it is also imperative not to lose sight of the richness that the “study of the singularity” (Bassegy, 1999) can provide. Hence, in this chapter I adopt a case study approach to explore, in depth, the details of how Aldine ISD has managed to move from being a district where token representations of minority achievement were conceptualized as evidence of district-wide success with children of color to becoming a district in which success for all children is the operating paradigm.

### **Background**

The social reality of the state of Texas is such that the recognition of diversity is essential to the social and economic development in the state over the next several decades. It is estimated that by the year 2022, Hispanics and African Americans combined will represent a majority of all persons living in Texas (Sharp, 1996). It is not only unconscionable but also economically imprudent to ignore the achievement gap that continues to exist between White and middle-class students and students belonging to one of the other disaggregated groups

identified in the state accountability system. And although the gap is narrowing somewhat at the state level, the disaggregation of data evidences a continuing problem that needs to be addressed. The achievement gap—now clearly verifiable thanks to the implementation of a system that allows for disaggregated data—has been theorized over and over by scholars and practitioners alike. Historically—and sadly, contemporaneously—the gap has often been attributed to genetic inferiority (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), cultural and environmental deficits (Bernstein & Henderson, 1969), and poverty (Singh, 1994). While these deficit theories have been critiqued for some time in sociology and anthropology, only recently have they been debunked in the field of educational research (see, for example, Valencia, 1997). Challenges to the deficit thinking models are empirical as well as theoretical, as evidenced, for example, by the achievement outcomes of several districts in Texas with high populations of economically disadvantaged students and students of color.

The development and implementation of a performance-based accountability system in Texas has generated a lens that allows policy makers, educational researchers, practitioners, and the general public to evaluate public school education in terms of student outcomes on standardized achievement tests. A manifestation of the national educational reform movement that demands greater accountability for student achievement, the Texas system stands out from among the variety of state accountability systems insofar as it disaggregates data on the basis of race, ethnicity, and economic status. Additionally, it stipulates performance levels for all identified groups at both district and campus levels, and it assures compliance by legislatively imposing inducements and disincentives.

The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) in Texas represents an integrated accountability system that includes an exceptional demand for racial and socioeconomic equity by requiring equal levels of performance for all disaggregated groups. Unlike other accountability systems that measure success against a group norm, the testing used in the accountability system in Texas is criterion-referenced; hence, by insisting on equal performance levels for all disaggregated groups, the system has built into it an ideological predilection for equity. The multiple indicators built into the design of the accountability system are of particular note as well. Since 1994, three types of performance indicators have been used: base, additional, and report-only (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 1996). The base indicators—which include the Texas Assessment for Academic Skills (TAAS), drop-out rates, and attendance rates—are used to determine campus and district performance ratings. Additional indicators, although not employed specifically to assign performance ratings, may determine whether or not the district or campus will receive acknowledgement for noteworthy achievement. These additional indicators include average college admissions test performance, percentage at or above criterion on college admissions tests, percentage of students tested on college admissions tests, and percentage of students passing the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP), a

college-readiness test. Finally, report-only indicators include such things as numbers of students exempt from TAAS, percentage of students completing advanced courses, and percentage of students taking and passing end-of-course exams in algebra, biology, U.S. history, and English II.

Although the preponderance of educational research has examined the roles of state and campus-level initiatives for accountability reform, recent studies have indicated that local educational authorities in public school districts have an unmistakable effect on the enactment and implementation of policies (Spillane & Thompson, 1997). These studies point to the possibility that local school districts might shape instructional concerns in ways that are different and separate from those of the state or the campus.

Without a doubt, the superintendent is one of the key persons involved in shaping the course school districts follow. The literature clearly reveals a historical tendency toward a greater involvement of the superintendent as instructional leader. Principals and teachers at individual campuses also have tremendous impact on increasing student achievement outcomes. From the effective schools model (Edmonds, 1979), the essential schools model (Sizer, 1992), the HiPass model (Scheurich, 1998), and the lessons from the high-performing Hispanic schools on the Texas border region (Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes-Scribner, 1999), the literature is replete with successful stories of improved achievement at the campus level. Because, however, the achievement gap continues to exist in Texas despite these individual campus success stories, the focus of the research discussed in this chapter was to find those elements that link the state, district, superintendency, and campus to determine whether there might be a more effective means of promoting educational equity.

### **Methodology and Site Description**

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger effort funded by the Sid W. Richardson Foundation and included observations; district documents; and individual and focus group interviews with board members, central office personnel, campus administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. Operating as a team of six researchers, we visited with persons in each district over a 6-day period (3 days on the first visit and 3 days on a follow-up visit). Data obtained during these visits were subsequently analyzed in accordance with conventional methods of qualitative inquiry, with particular emphasis on the “constant comparative method of analysis” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62).

With an official student enrollment approaching 50,000, Aldine was the 83rd-largest public elementary- and secondary- school district in the United States in 1997–1998 (Council of the Great City Schools, 1999). Demographically, 86.4% of the students in Aldine were children of color in 1998–99 compared with 55.9% in the State of Texas. More than two thirds of the student population in Aldine was economically disadvantaged, as compared to only 48.5% at the state level.

One fifth of the students in Aldine had limited English proficiency compared with 13.5% in the state. Clearly, Aldine ISD was characterized by relatively high proportions of children of color, economically disadvantaged students, and children with limited English proficiency. Greater ethnic diversity among the teaching personnel at Aldine Independent School District is evident when compared with the percentages at the state level. In Aldine ISD, 25.5% of the teachers were African American, 7.8% were Hispanic, and 1.3% were from other minority groups resulting in a teacher population that is over one-third minority, whereas statewide only one fourth of the teachers come from minority groups.

### **Analysis**

From a substantial set of data collected from interviews, observations, and document analysis, I have distinguished four themes as a framework for organizing the discussion of the complex ways in which Aldine Independent School District has managed to develop and maintain a commitment to issues of educational equity. These themes, which are discussed in detail below, are: (1) the historical context, (2) accountability as context, (3) commonly held district beliefs, and (4) systemic modifications.

#### *Historical Context*

Opting for the historical context as one of the significant themes of Aldine's commitment to equity is neither accidental nor gratuitous. As I shall point out, rapidly changing demographics, a brush with financial disaster, and the challenges of complying with a federal desegregation order have all shaped the community in ways that draw attention to issues of change and equity. Since May 4, 1935, when voters approved the consolidation of Common District #29, Aldine ISD has had a history of rising above adversity. From a number of early fires that destroyed school buildings in the 1940s and '50s to the financial disaster of 1959 that left the district unable to fulfill its financial obligations, brushes with misfortune have left their mark on a community that pulls together in the face of ongoing change. When the Texas legislature authorized the sale of \$200,000 in bonds in 1959 to stimulate the solvency of the district, Aldine residents purchased the bonds and subsequently endorsed new programs that resulted in the re-accreditation of the district in 1960. This led to a district focus on financial stability that endures even today.

Later, in 1965, the Federal Department of Justice issued a desegregation order mandating the elimination of a dual school system that precluded an equitable education for African-American students. Though the original court order remained essentially dormant for a number of years, in order "to eliminate the vestiges of discrimination," Aldine Independent School District was required to take more affirmative measures beginning in 1977. From that time through the mid 1990s, Aldine provided a fairly extensive bussing system in order to maintain

compliance with the court order; however, by the mid 1990s, parents, educators, and community leaders began to seek an alternative solution to the rigorous requirements of a court order that continued to constrain operational decisions in the district that were increasingly less dependent on demographic considerations and more concerned with educational outcomes.

Today, faced with the exorbitant financial expenditures that compliance with the federal desegregation order implied, Aldine Independent School District continues to seek solutions that will allow them more flexibility, particularly given the increasing populations of students of color and the high-level achievement outcomes they are obtaining across racial categories. Encompassing an area of approximately 111 square miles with nearly 50,000 students, Aldine Independent School District had budgeted revenues for the academic year 1999–2000 of more than \$335 million. Total per-pupil expenditures for the year were budgeted at almost \$6,247, and per-pupil operating expenditures budgeted were \$5,205. Nearly one fourth of its 3,324 teachers held master’s degrees. Over one third of its teachers were persons of color, and nearly 60% of the teachers currently employed in Aldine ISD have held teaching positions in the district for six years or more.

As pointed out above, the rapidly changing demographics of the community have had a marked impact on the administrative and curricular decisions in Aldine ISD. From a district that began as a predominantly rural, middle-class, Anglo population, Aldine has evolved into a community in which more than 70% of its students are economically disadvantaged and fewer than 14% of its students are Anglo. Faced with a federal desegregation order, a dramatically reduced Anglo population, and a community that is significantly disadvantaged economically, Aldine Independent School District has found the impetus to excel as a school district rated “recognized” in the state of Texas for the past four years. It is my contention that Aldine’s success was in large part determined through the juxtaposition of a district culture set to brave the challenges of a changing community and the implementation of the accountability system in Texas. In the next section, I examine the ways in which accountability has provided a motivation for achieving high performance.

### *Accountability as Context*

The criterion-referenced performance evaluation that forms the basis of the accountability system in Texas represents the fundamental tool by which policy makers, educational researchers, practitioners, and the general public are able to evaluate public-school education in terms of student outcomes. While there is disconfirming evidence that accountability systems have served to promote more equitable schooling (see, for example, Ball, 1999; Linn, 2000; and McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001), the data from Aldine ISD reveal a different story. Confronted with the now public—and previously unavailable—assessment data of student achievement disaggregated by race and socioeconomic status, district personnel



in Aldine chose to utilize the assessment data in order to achieve better results across the district. By providing access to information, the accountability system represents a means of comparing actual performance levels to desired outcomes.

The disconfirming evidence alluded to earlier suggests, however, that the mere existence of a system that calls for greater accountability is in-sufficient to produce the positive kinds of change that will result in more equity in schooling. Leadership was repeatedly cited in Aldine as the essential ingredient required to generate support for the idea of responsibility, the motivation for the creation of monitoring systems, and adherence to expectations. Such leadership must be present at the highest levels of the educational system.

Given the strong support of the superintendent for using the data from the accountability system to establish goals and implement systems to monitor the achievement of those goals, it is not surprising that the rhetoric(s) of accountability that emerge from district personnel tend also to favor the concepts behind accountability and assessment.

*[Central Office Personnel:]* I try to get my teachers to see it's a very positive thing. And when we first started looking very carefully at the accountability system, suddenly everybody realized the need for staff development. So we have used that as the impetus to make changes. And I feel like that level of accountability has made people more responsible.

Still, this support for the accountability system is neither unanimous nor without qualification. Despite the positive influence the state accountability system has had in Aldine ISD, there is nevertheless a belief that the requirements of the system could further be improved.

Similarly, when asked whether or not there had been any negative responses in Aldine ISD as the accountability system and its concomitant focus on monitoring achieved greater consequence, one person stated:

*[Central Office Personnel:]* Of course, in anything you do there are going to be people who don't buy into the philosophy or can't make a paradigm shift into a way of thinking.... But if you are not a team player and you can't make the paradigm shift that all kids can be successful and you are not willing to do whatever it takes to get them there, then perhaps this is not the district for them to work in. Because that's where we are and that's where we are going.

This comment reveals the importance of both the process of garnering support for belief in the accountability system as a tool for promoting equity and the responsibility of the district to build the capacity necessary that will allow principals and teachers to “buy into” its corresponding philosophy.

As a district characterized by rapidly changing demographics—with increasingly larger numbers of students of color and economically disadvantaged

students—over the years, Aldine ISD has had to modify its approach to issues of educational equity. Despite the commitment during his early tenure to provide a strong education for all students, the current superintendent in Aldine ISD fully attributes the greater emphasis on educational equity to the implementation of the state accountability system. The availability of performance data disaggregated by race has stimulated both an awareness of inequitable achievement results and a desire to change. The following discussion plainly reveals the impact the accountability system has had on the beliefs of the superintendent:

*[Superintendent:]* [Back 8 or 10 years ago] we didn't have the data that showed that not everybody was performing at the level that they're performing at today. We never disaggregated test scores ten years ago. We had a Black valedictorian at Aldine High School that went on to be the number one student at the Naval Academy when we were treating all Black kids alike.... We had Hispanic kids that were just outstanding students, but you look at that and say well, yeah, Hispanic kids are getting a fair shake in Aldine because we've got Hispanic kids that are doing great. No, they weren't, because we didn't look at the data. We didn't have the data to disaggregate to look at. We began to look at— we were forced to look at— it very closely, and about five years ago is when all this came about.

Furthermore, in Aldine there is a clear belief that it is the responsibility of the district to provide the opportunities for success. As another leader in the district office states:

*[Central Office Personnel:]* We want to do what's best for kids and we want to do it as best we can.... There's a lot of people out there who think low socioeconomic kids cannot perform, and we're going to prove them wrong. They can.

### *Commonly Held District Beliefs*

The disaggregation of student achievement data available through the state accountability system provides district administrators with knowledge concerning the achievement gap between and among racial/ethnic groups. Though the availability of this knowledge represents a crucial step toward the promotion of educational equity inasmuch as it provides a clear and measurable indication of the inequities present in the current educational system, alone it is insufficient to guarantee a change in the behavior of district and campus personnel. As Hersey and Blanchard (1993) noted, behavior is associated with values and beliefs; and while it is true that these might be influenced by knowledge, there is no certainty that any alteration of behavior will transpire. Furthermore, values, attitudes, and beliefs are equally as significant as

managerial skills and abilities (Senge & McLagan, 1993). In this section, therefore, I discuss the commonly held values and beliefs that have inspired the transformation of Aldine Independent School District into an organization that has made significant advances towards reducing the achievement gap.

*All children can learn.* Underlying all other beliefs and behaviors in Aldine ISD is the widely shared notion that all children can succeed and that it is the responsibility of the district and the schools to provide the opportunities for success to all children. From board members to the superintendent and from central office personnel to campus administrators, the discourse of success for all students is pervasive. As indicated earlier, the significant advances in closing the achievement gap began to occur in Aldine Independent School District approximately six years ago. Prior to the commencement of that reduction, it was the vision of the superintendent—inspired by the knowledge of the inequitable results that were revealed by the accountability system—that begat the modification in attitudes and behaviors. As one board member recalls,

*[Board Member.]* I can take you back five years ago. The district is not very different in its vision and goals from that point. When we, as a team, responded to an administrative plea for us to provide a seamless transition for students to have opportunities for success.... *I think we can attribute it to the point when the Superintendent...expressed to his staff—and then his staff to us—a desire to realign and establish a clear criteria [sic] and establish clear benchmarks and that all students should learn, and that we are in charge of the responsibility to give them an opportunity [Emphasis added].*

The superintendent, when asked to respond to his own change in beliefs and behaviors regarding the possibility of success for all students, expressed a growing frustration with a deficit mentality that continually sought excuses for failure in the sociodemographic characteristics of Aldine.

*[Superintendent]* I don't say it was me personally, but I felt like we could do better. I got tired of our name in the paper being at the bottom of the list. But what I got tired of hearing is that we were minority, that we were poor. That that's the best we could do.... And I said, "Well, enough is enough. We are going to change the way we're doing business in Aldine."

Changing the way they did business in Aldine meant prioritizing student performance as the motivating goal behind all activity in the district, or as the superintendent (paraphrasing Senge) likes to put it, "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

Faced with the vision that student performance would become the number-one priority in the district, key personnel in Aldine ISD began to look around the state to see where districts were having success with similar populations. One of

the obvious choices was Brazosport, the first district in the State of Texas to achieve recognized status. As the deputy superintendent for curriculum and Instruction recalled:

We went to Brazosport and visited with Dr. Anderson [the superintendent], and it became very clear after listening to Dr. Anderson that there was no magic to increasing student performance. It was, first of all, a very strong belief that kids can learn. Secondly, it was a commitment to that belief. Thirdly, it was a plan on how you were going to go about achieving this. Fourthly, it was a focus on what kids need to know.

In other words, success in Aldine Independent School District was to be motivated by harmoniously linking the belief that all children could succeed to the systemic behaviors and activities that would prove the belief to be true.

*The superintendent provides the vision.* As the board member quoted previously indicated, it was the visionary leadership of the superintendent that provided the impetus for change in Aldine. Over and over, individuals in Aldine cited the vision of the superintendent as the chief element in effecting change in the district.

*[Principal:]* Well, I think it took revision and planning and everybody kind of rolling in the same direction as far as a common goal. The superintendent had a vision for Aldine in terms of us being a recognized district and then an exemplary district.

T.J.Kowalski (1999) argued that although the personal vision of the superintendent might be “simply the mental image of where the organization has been and where it should be in the future” (p. 211), unless it comes to be part of the collective vision of the district organization, it will be no more than an individual aspiration. Clearly, the superintendent cannot act in isolation to influence student achievement levels. While his or her vision is essential to the development of a successful organization, without the active contribution and participation of the teaching staff, little progress can be expected.

*The district is responsible for student achievement outcomes.* The new leadership of the superintendent differs from the traditional leadership in that it involves greater collaboration with other administrative personnel rather than providing bureaucratic management at the head of a topdown hierarchical organization. Whereas in a prior manifestation of traditional leadership, the superintendent tended to be more focused on budget matters, personnel, building needs, and maintenance, the successful educational leader today must provide instructional leadership, transformational leadership, and visionary leadership. In the previous section, we saw how the superintendent functions as the visionary leader of the district.

Now we turn to his role as instructional leader. As a corollary to the belief that all children can learn, the superintendent began to assume the responsibility for student achievement by participating more actively in instructional matters. Even though the current superintendent has held his position for over 14 years, the impressive advances in student achievement and the resulting closing of the achievement gap did not begin until approximately 5 or 6 years ago. During our interviews with district and campus personnel, we pointedly asked individuals at all levels of the organization to what factor(s) they attributed the change in performance. The answer was virtually unanimous: the instructional leadership of the superintendent. As one individual in the central office stated:

The idea that we are critical to kids excelling—not that we’re just the vehicle for those kids we want to excel—we’re here to cause them to excel rather than we’re here and available to help them excel.... We’ve been driving, I think, kids to excel rather than just being available and helping and encouraging, and that’s been pure instructional leadership from [the superintendent] and [the deputy superintendent]. I mean that’s where it is and...if the instructional leaders aren’t on fire for kids learning it isn’t going to happen.

Given that this interviewee is not even remotely involved in matters of instruction, this statement is particularly informative, bespeaking a pervasiveness of the belief that providing instructional leadership is the responsibility of the district.

That the superintendent has actually assumed the role of instructional leader is evident in his choice to establish an organizational hierarchy that reflects these values. First, he appointed two individuals immediately below him in the organizational chart who both have duties that directly impact instructional matters: the deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction and the executive director of curriculum and instruction. Second, together this instructional team has created a cadre of program directors who function in the central office to provide instructional leadership directly to teachers throughout the district. As I shall point out in a subsequent section, the way in which the program directors execute their responsibilities is reflective of the belief that the district is responsible for student outcomes. Last, these instructional leaders in the central office have made it abundantly clear that the chief responsibility of campus administrators is also instruction. As one principal stated when asked what the district expected of her:

I think they expect for me to have an influence on how the campus operates and the results that our students have on assessments. I have never gotten the feeling that they expect me to take care of every single problem.... I think they expect me to be the instructional leader here. I think I am given the freedom to approach them however I think it’s best.

In sum, then, the ultimate responsibility for instruction lies in the leadership role of the principal. Yet that role is reinforced and supported by all levels of district leadership from the Program Directors, through the leaders for curriculum and instruction, all the way to the superintendent.

*Integrity, honesty, and doing right things for kids.* Analogous to the findings in Scheurich's (1998) study of highly successful schools, the districtwide belief in Aldine ISD in integrity, honesty, and doing right things for kids underlies a way of interacting with each other that undoubtedly leads to higher achievement across the district. When asked to identify a common set of values in Aldine Independent School District, the superintendent said:

Integrity. Honesty. I mentioned Judeo-Christian ethics. Doing right things for kids. Being able to laugh. Don't take ourselves too serious. The main thing is the main thing, and that's student performance. You need to keep that above all else.

Recalling that transformational leaders attempt to affect actions and performance by appealing to "higher ideals and moral values such as liberty, justice, equality, peace, and humanitarianism" (Yukl, 1989, p. 210), the superintendent in Aldine ISD demonstrates a mode of leadership that seeks to influence "by generating values rather than directives" (Kowalski & Oates, 1993, p. 383). In fact, he is remarkably explicit about how he allows these higher ideals and values to guide his leadership in Aldine.

*[Researcher.]* When you communicate with your staff—either the area superintendents or the program directors or the whole staff of the district—do you have a particular message? Themes that you keep re-emphasizing?

*[Superintendent]* You bet. Student performance, honor and integrity, professionalism, honor, dignity, student performance, honor, dignity, student performance. I really try to instill the sense of high morals, high values, dignity, and student performance. I tell my teachers and I tell principals: Take care of yourselves and take care of three things mentally, spiritually, and physically. Stay abreast of what is current, what's new, what's happening in the world of education, how to make things happen, how to reach kids. Spiritually, take care of yourself. Take care of yourself physically. I get letters from teachers and principals thanking me for that. I've never gotten one that says "you shouldn't be talking about that." I don't cross the line, I don't think, but I'm not ashamed about telling people. I'm not ashamed about talking about it.

### *Systemic Modifications Lead to Success*

In view of the long tenure of the current superintendent, who has occupied his current position in the district for over 14 years, and the remarkable stability of

the school board, one of the key study findings concerns the systemic modifications that occurred to produce the dramatic improvements in student performance from the mid 1990s forward. As I stated earlier, achievement levels by students of color were notably lower than those of Anglo students. The closing of the achievement gap could not be accounted for by a change in either board or administrative personnel; hence, the explanation must be located elsewhere. When asked to what they attributed success in Aldine in terms of higher achievement, individuals throughout the district consistently listed several systemic modifications as causative of improved student performance. The three most important modifications cited were (1) the decentralization of authority, (2) a change in the organizational structure of the district that focuses on horizontal and vertical teams, and (3) changes in the curriculum. In this section, I shall explore the essential features of each of these systemic modifications and the implications of each for the improvement of student outcomes.

*The decentralization of authority.* According to Wohlstetter and Smyer (1994), one of the key elements for the successful achievement of highperforming schools is the decentralization of power from district leaders to campus administrators. Decentralization, or site-based management, began to take effect in Aldine ISD around 1996 at the same time as other systemic modifications were being implemented that would focus intensely on student outcomes. The change from district authority to sitebased decision making represented a radical departure from prior ways of thinking. As the superintendent indicated:

We used to believe that it was an unpardonable sin if you spent your teaching supply money for a capital outlay piece of equipment and vice versa. You had X amount of dollars for teaching supplies and you had X amount of dollars for capital outlay, and you stayed within those budgets. You didn't go over. The budgeting, now we just give it to them in one lump sum.... That's changed. I don't really care how they spend their money as long as it's lawful.

According to central office personnel, budgets are allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis with a different amount per pupil distributed depending on the type of campus. For example, in the 1999–2000 budget, high schools and 9th-grade centers received \$3,648 per student plus \$8,581; middle schools received \$2,779 per student plus \$3,581; intermediate schools received \$2,318 per student plus \$1,286; and elementary schools received \$2,318 per student plus \$776. Despite the relative flexibility of campus administrators to make budgetary and curricular decisions at their schools, the site-based management process in Aldine ISD is not without constraint. In addition to a required lawfulness of every decision, campuslevel decisions are monitored at the district for their applicability to achieving and maintaining high levels of student performance. Reflective of the philosophical propensity of Aldine ISD, which promotes a decentralization of

authority while maintaining a strong district presence, such monitoring is closely aligned with the predilection for accountability that lies behind much of the activity in the district. As the superintendent stated:

I mentioned earlier that we believe strongly in [site-based] decision making. But people are held accountable for what they implement, and it needs to be researchbased. It needs to be scientifically reviewed. It needs to be applicable to our kids, and we don't tell our principals you need to do this kind of reading recovery program. We have varied programs out there, but it's got to be results-oriented.

The systems designed to monitor the site-based decision-making process and student achievement outcomes at the campuses are discussed in the next section.

*Horizontal and vertical teams.* One of the more strategic innovations of Aldine Independent School District was the establishment of the horizontal and vertical teams that are used to monitor accountability and progress and to build capacity. While other school districts sometimes make reference to their horizontal or vertical teams, Aldine ISD actively sought to re-organize their district in the mid 1990s in order to “take ownership of [their] students K-12 in a vertical alignment and think vertically rather than horizontally” [superintendent]. As the superintendent and others indicated throughout this research, the common way for educators and administrators to think is horizontally, that is, elementary personnel communicate with other elementary personnel, high school personnel with other high-school personnel, and so forth. If the focus were truly to be on the students, a new mode of organization was necessary that would reflect the fact that students move vertically through the educational system rather than horizontally.

When the board members approved the proposed reorganization, Aldine divided up its rather large district into five separate areas, each of which is headed by an area superintendent responsible for all the campuses in the area. Hence, each area superintendent is in charge of a high school, intermediate school(s), middle school(s), and elementary schools.

The resultant matrix-type of organizational configuration permits a district presence in the daily activities of the schools in Aldine ISD that aids in establishing the vision and focus on district goals. On the one hand, every other week all the principals in Aldine ISD convene for what is commonly referred to as a “horizontal meeting.” The emphasis at these horizontal meetings tends to be capacity building and professional-staff development. While the specific topics vary from time to time as the needs of the district change, the focus is generally on issues that matter specifically to principals at a particular school level. At times, for instance, the topic has been reading and math benchmark targets; sometimes, assessment issues have been discussed. At still other times, the horizontal teams have grappled with issues of meeting the needs of special



populations. In any event, the key purpose at these meetings is to develop and to enrich the skills and knowledge of the campus leaders.

On the other hand, the vertical team meetings unite a different group of campus administrators. Also occurring biweekly on those weeks when the horizontal teams do not assemble, the vertical teams bring together all the principals in a given area, which, as I explained above, includes the high school principal, the intermediate school principal(s), the middle school principal(s), and the elementary school principals. One of the identified functions of the vertical team is to reinforce the professional development that occurs at the horizontal meeting; however, two of the more important objectives of the vertical meetings are (1) to assure that the curricula are aligned from grade to grade and from school level to school level, and (2) to aid in the establishment of a district-wide system to minimize and/or prevent school drop-outs. As one area superintendent put it:

When you think of alignment, you think curriculum right away. But we like to think also drop-out prevention, being sure the elementary school has a hand in recovering drop-outs. We have a planning place where that takes place and having all of our schools involved in the efforts of the high school.... We try to work on long-range type of efforts, and they are done through the vertical concept.

As with the horizontal meetings, the specific goals of the vertical meetings change from time to time. According to one of the key persons responsible for designing the concept, when the vertical team meetings were first instituted, a considerable effort was placed on principal staff development that emphasized instructional strategies. Later on, as principals in the district were more familiar with instructional and leadership expectations, different issues were highlighted. Still, as the needs of the district change, the area superintendents do not hesitate to return to material of previous meetings. In the past 2 years, for instance, there have been approximately 25 new principals in the district; hence, recently there has been an increased focus once again on building the capacity of these new principals in instructional strategies and leadership skills.

In addition to providing a forum for reinforcing skills development and knowledge enhancement, the vertical meetings serve also as a vehicle for the transmission of district values. As one district employee states:

Our goal is to see if we can identify what the values in the district are. We have a vision statement, and our vision statement says to educate every child to his [*sic*] fullest potential. My vision is to give every child a future in this school district. We want to see where we are, and we want to put the vision statement out. And we are going to do that with values.

In addition to the recurrent reinforcement of district values, another ongoing goal of the matrix teams is to specify and to sequence the curriculum within the

district. In the next section, I discuss what has come to be known in Aldine ISD as “benchmarking.”

*The stipulation and categorization of the curriculum.* In the academic year 1996–97, once the superintendent of Aldine ISD had decided to initiate the changes that would carry the district to becoming a recognized district in the state accountability system, the deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction set about creating a system of benchmark targets for all grades in core area subjects. Upon receiving orders from the superintendent to focus on improved student outcomes, the recently appointed deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction decided to take the TAAS test herself. Concluding firsthand that the test was designed to assess a set of basic skills required of all students, she decided that the focus of the district had to be to clarify those required skills at all levels and to provide the instructional guidance necessary for all teachers to be successful teaching the defined skills to all students. As the deputy superintendent recalls:

We were not doing well. So I said the first thing we have to figure out is what we are going to teach, and the teacher has to know...not what they have to teach but what kids have to master.

Defining benchmarks as “the set of skills that a youngster has to have to master a concept” (Central Office Personnel, Aldine ISD, 1999), the first order of business was to call together all personnel associated with curriculum. Within a period of four months, district personnel drafted a set of benchmark targets for core areas and spent the next 3 years refining them to make certain the curriculum was aligned from level to level across the district and that the skills designed to be taught represented those skills that would be tested.

While the intensive focus on an aligned curriculum clearly had a positive effect on student achievement in Aldine ISD—moving the district to achieve a recognized status in the state, initial responses were by no means unanimously receptive. As one district employee remembers:

Oh wait, there’s a side note, Changing Behavior came along at this point because when we did the benchmarks... I went to visit [the teachers] quite frequently. And the last day I sat down with five kindergarten teachers. One of them was very experienced and probably a master teacher, but she said she had come closest that year to quitting than she had ever come before.... You know how in every room there’s always a child that just doesn’t follow the norm and he walks to his own drumbeat and sometimes they’re very active. Well, she had four or five of these kids in her room. And...we almost lost her to teaching. And she said, I didn’t know what to do. And then the [other teachers] said that they all had one or two or three of these children.... So, we began to look at developing our own discipline management plan. And it started out to be Changing Behavior, its whole

title is *Changing the Behavior of Children through the Changing Behavior of Teachers*. And we implemented it at EC and kindergarten that first year. It was totally developed by our teachers.

The above comment reflects the intense efforts of the district to implement a system of curriculum alignment and to provide the necessary support for teachers to be successful. It also reveals, however, an incremental or evolutionary mode of approaching issues in the district. Undoubtedly, the continued efforts of Aldine Independent School District to evolutionize their aspirations have the potential for prompting ever better achievement results among their students. In the next section, I offer some closing interpretations of the meanings of these findings.

### Conclusions

Researchers have given less attention to articulating the process of moving from selecting the threads (the emergent themes) to weaving the tapestry (the portrait). This is understandable. The act of creating the gestalt is a less codified and delineated activity than the identification and naming of emergent themes. It is both systematic and creative, structured and organic, disciplined and intuitive. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 244)

In the political and academic discussions of accountability, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are caught up in the solidified categories that limit both our understanding of the complex phenomena that are affected by state policy and our ability to effectively critique the normalizing practices that maintain insidious social inequities. The dominant discourse among scholars and practitioners who criticize the injustices of an oppressive system, for example, represents accountability as a tool of the powerful elite designed to uphold the subordination of those less powerful. The only legitimate claims in this discourse hold (1) that testing is by its nature a gate-keeping mechanism that keeps the ill-prepared others from reaping the rewards of successful performance, (2) that the implementation of mandatory testing necessarily leads to a narrowing of the curriculum available to students, (3) that the requirements imposed by a state-mandated accountability system dislocate the control of the classroom from the teacher to the policy monitors, and (4) that the testing requirements demand a claim on financial resources making them unavailable for more worthwhile endeavors.

So how do we justify the claim that Aldine Independent School District has disrupted the dominant discourse by using accountability to further educational equity? Certainly, the evidence presented herein provides a powerful buttress to the argument that the local school district can have a powerful impact on the effects of the implementation of state policy. The justification for the claim of disruption lies primarily in the detailed thoughts, actions, behaviors, conversations, and other types of interactions between and among thousands of educators, administrators, board members, parents, and community members in

Aldine ISD. It lies in the very ordinariness of a community that glimpsed an opportunity to use a state educational policy to make a difference in the lives of its particular students. It lies, ultimately, in the desire of a local school district and its constituents “to make sense of the world against the grain of ‘common sense’” (Davies, 2000, p. 165). As Davies explained,

This does not mean abandoning common sense, necessarily, but rather it means engaging in a dual motion of extracting [oneself] from the weighty inevitability of common knowledges, and of finding creative and unexpected ways of knowing, of making sense, (p. 165)

It is this shift away from the “weighty inevitability” of the discursive evils of accountability that creates the space for a new way of making sense of the effects of state policy on equitable student outcomes.

In summary, then, the emergent themes—or “threads,” as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997, p. 244) preferred to call them—that arose from this project were (1) the historical context that emphasized financial resourcefulness, tenacity, and commitment to educational reform that would underscore issues of equity, (2) the context of a policy of accountability that provided both the means for perceiving historical inequities and a competitive motivation to attain success, (3) a set of commonly held district beliefs that highlighted the notion that all children could succeed and that it was the responsibility of the district to ensure that they would, and (4) a set of systems designed to produce the equitable outcomes the administrators believed were possible. The tapestry I have elected to weave (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) reveals at the center an influential, visionary superintendent at the head of a district who has experienced the weight of the longevity of the history of Aldine. Believing that the district could, in fact, make a difference in the lives of the children in Aldine and relying on the hard data available from the state accountability system that substantiated the existent inequities, he spread his visions and beliefs throughout his administration. Aided in his quest by key personnel who shared his belief that an informed leadership could impact instructional outcomes, Aldine Independent School District developed and implemented systems that would achieve those goals. Guided by vision, culture, and district support, the teachers in Aldine Independent School District have been able to raise student achievement levels across racial and socioeconomic categories, thereby helping to reduce the achievement gap within the district. The active participation of all stakeholders within the district, including board members, central office personnel, campus administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members, led to a coherent image of a community working toward the common goal of success for all children.

While I was in Aldine I had the opportunity to meet with many teachers in the district. I recall one in particular who reflected on the phenomenon of

paradigmatic coalescence as the district underwent the philosophical changes that brought everyone to focus on success for all children. As she stated,

I think that a lot of individual people felt [the change in philosophy]. There were pockets of teachers who, since they began teaching, felt that in individual classrooms.... Then it came down—from the principals, from the leadership of our school district, from the superintendent on down. [They said]: “This is what’s expected and our students can do this.” And so the people who had always felt that felt very encouraged. And the people who didn’t feel that way were kind of on the outs because this is the philosophy we’re having, and those really strong teachers who always expected that of their kids really overpowered the people that weren’t interested. So...the accepted thing to do was to have the high expectations. And the unaccepted thing to do would be the slacker teacher.

This coming together of one mind toward a vision of high achievement levels for all students has provided the fundamental impetus for change in the Aldine ISD.

In a state where over 48% of the students in public schools are economically disadvantaged and nearly 56% of the students are persons of color, the importance of an in-depth study of a successful district characterized by high populations of economically disadvantaged students and students of color lies in the very existence of the high levels of academic achievement the district has produced at a district-wide level. Unlike other research methodologies that focus on broad sampling techniques in order to generalize results to larger populations, the case study approach used in this analysis serves precisely to counter the erroneous yet long-held belief that high levels of academic achievement cannot be systematically sustained with persons of color and economically disadvantaged populations. This “study of the singularity” (Bassey, 1999) represents a dramatic beacon to those for whom issues of social justice and equity in education are primordial concerns. By focusing on the story of Aldine’s success, we might come to some understanding of what it takes to raise the levels of achievement for all students across the state, indeed, across the nation.

## References

- Ball, S.J. (1999). *Performativities and fabrications in the education economy: Toward the performative society?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne.
- Bassey, M. (1999). *Case study research in educational settings*. Buckingham, U.K.: Open University Press.
- Bernstein, B., & Henderson, D. (1969). Social class differences in the relevance of language to socialization. *Sociology*, 3, 1–20.

- Council of the Great City Schools. (1999). *Enrollment of the 100-largest public elementary and secondary public school districts in the United States: 1997–98*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Davies, B. (2000). Epilogue: On mor(t)ality. In *A body of writing: 1990–99* (pp. 165–73). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Edmonds, R.R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership* 37 (1), 15–24.
- Herrnstein, R.J., & Murray, C. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.
- Hersey, P., & Blanchard, K.H. (1993). *Management of organizational behavior: Utilizing human resources* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kowalski, J., & Oates, A. (1993). The evolving role of superintendents in school-based management. *Journal of School Leadership* 3, 380–90.
- Kowalski, T.J. (1999). *The school superintendent: Theory, practice, and cases*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J.H. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Linn, R.L. (2000). Assessments and accountability. *Educational Researcher* 29(2), 16.
- McNeil, L.M., & Valenzuela, A. (2001). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In G.Orfield and M.L.Kornhaber (Eds.). *Raising standards or raising barriers: Inequality and high-stakes testing in public education* (127–50). New York: The Century Foundation.
- Reyes, P., Scribner, J.D., & Paredes Scribner, A. (1999). *Lessons from high performing Hispanic schools: Creating learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Scheurich, J.J. (1998). Highly successful and loving, public elementary schools populated mainly by low-SES children of color: Core beliefs and cultural characteristics. *Urban Education* 33(4), 451–91.
- Senge, P.M., & McLagan, P.A. (1993). Transforming the practice of management. *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 4(1), 5–32.
- Sharp, J. (1996). *Population forecast for Texas by race/ethnicity*. Austin: Office of the Comptroller, State of Texas.
- Singh, V.P. (1994). The underclass in the United States: Some correlates of economic change. In J.Kretovics & E.J.Nussel (Eds.). *Transforming urban education* (pp. 57–72). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Sizer, T. (1992). *Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Spillane, J.P., & Thompson, C.L. (1997). Reconstructing conceptions of local capacity: The local education agency's capacity for ambitious instructional reform. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 19(2), 185–203.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (1996). *The development of accountability systems nationwide and in Texas* (Statewide Texas Educational Progress Study Report No. 1). Austin, TX: Author.
- Valencia, R.R. (Ed.). (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.

Wohlstetter, P., & Smyer, R. (1994). Models of high-performance schools. In S.A.Mohrman & P.Wohlstetter (Eds.). *School-based management: Organizing for high performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Yukl, G.A. (1989). *Leadership in organizations* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

# **CHAPTER 12**

## **Using an Aligned System to Make Real Progress for Texas Students**

SUSAN SCLAFANI

As we look at the state of Texas over the last 15 years, we see an educational system that has changed the fortunes of students, especially minority students, in dramatic ways. It has done that through the steady additions of the critical pieces that established an aligned system of what is taught, what is tested, and how schools will be held accountable for student achievement. From this practitioner's perspective, the impact on student achievement of the alignment has been a positive step toward ensuring that all children learn to high levels, but it is only a step, not a final destination. To understand the current situation, one must start back at the beginning.

### **Initial Efforts at Alignment**

In 1984, the state established Essential Elements, which were curriculum standards that described what should be taught in each subject at each grade level. These elements were reviewed by constituent groups across the state, including parents, teachers, administrators, community leaders, business people, and university professors. After the development of the Essential Elements, textbook proclamations (which the state issues to specify for publishers the content to be included in state-funded textbooks) were aligned with the Essential Elements so that teachers would have resources matched to the Essential Elements they were to teach. In 1986, the state began to measure student achievement of the Essential Elements through a basic skills tests, known as the Texas Education Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS). That test was upgraded in 1990 to focus on applications of knowledge and skills through a testing program known as the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The TAAS is currently given in reading and mathematics in Grades 3–8 and 10, writing in Grades 4, 8, and 10, and science and social studies in Grade 8. Students in regular and bilingual education are included in the testing in either English or Spanish, depending upon their language of instruction. As of 2000, students in special education are also included if they are working on grade level. Students in special education who are working below grade level are tested on off-level or alternative tests. In addition, recent immigrants who are not literate in English or Spanish are exempted from testing for 1 year.



In 1992, the state added the third prong of its system, the accountability system. Schools are held accountable for the performance of their students. At first, the aggregate performance of the student groups was the basis for the performance rating, but in 1994, the state moved to a rating of schools based on the performance of the subgroups on campus: African-American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged students. The rating of the school was based on the performance of the lowest performing subgroup, demanding that schools pay attention to subgroups on their campuses. No longer was the average of all students allowed to hide the low performance of any given subgroup. Schools that are designated “low performing” have 3 years in which to improve performance. If they do not, the district must meet with the Commissioner of Education to explain what changes will be made.

### **Houston's Experience with Accountability**

At the same time as the state developed its system, the Houston school board and administration developed a local, matrix accountability system that included the state’s use of a snapshot of performance, but added a dimension for progress. Thus, each school was rated on the performance of all students on the spring TAAS tests, and each school also received a progress rating based on the school’s progress over the previous spring. The matrix ratings ranged from “exemplary with exemplary progress” to “low performing with no progress.” Thus, a school might be “acceptable” in performance, but “exemplary” in the level of progress it had achieved since the last year. This enabled the district to recognize those schools that were making dramatic progress, even if their performance levels were at less than the “recognized” designation.

### **Houston's Progress**

From 1993 to ‘99, the district kept the local accountability criteria constant, except for raising the achievement levels for each category. The number of schools that were rated as low performing and low acceptable dropped from 30 low-performing and 57 low-acceptable in 1993 to 0 low-performing and 0 low-acceptable schools 1998. In addition, the number of exemplary schools rose from 10 in 1993 to 83 in 1998. In 1998, all but 50 schools were either recognized or exemplary!

How did this progress occur? The improvements came from three major factors. The primary factor is the availability of performance data connected to each student and available down to the TAAS target level. Schools across the district and across the state were finally able to connect what was taught to what was learned. While the Essential Elements dictated what each teacher should teach, it was not until TAAS that teachers were able to use valid and reliable assessments that told them what students had learned. Many districts have done what Houston has done: ensured that teachers had access to longitudinal data on

each student in their classes. With such systems, teachers were able to develop individual and small-group education plans to ensure mastery of areas of weakness from previous years while also moving students forward in the state-mandated curriculum.

The second factor is the public nature of the measurement system. Annually, the district publishes the matrix of schools and honors those schools that have achieved recognized and exemplary status. That provided an impetus for acceptable or low-acceptable schools to improve their performance. It also provided role models for them to observe and emulate. At the school and classroom levels, it provided a blueprint of those areas where teachers should focus their personal development plans and where grade levels or schools should focus the school's professional development plans.

The public nature of the data from the accountability system, and especially the disaggregated data, made clear where schools were. The state's insistence on publishing the scores of each subgroup of students made the school community aware of which students were well served and which students were not served. When a prominent high school in Houston was labeled low performing because of the drop-out rate of its immigrant students, the school rallied to solve the problem. If immigrant students were leaving to get low-paying jobs to help support their families, the community could provide jobs contingent on their staying in school.

The third factor in the improvement was the targeted assistance provided to schools that were performing at low-performing or low-acceptable levels. Before Texas had an accountability system, it was not evident who needed assistance. Each targeted school was paired with a team of principals, curriculum specialists, and researchers to observe current practices, discuss issues and data with the staff, and assist in the development and implementation of an improvement plan that is funded by the district. Central office staff worked with the staffs at these schools to analyze their performance data and determine the strengths and weaknesses of individual students and teachers as well as grade-level and schoolwide programs.

The targeted schools learned how to align their program of professional development to the weak areas identified by the data. And, perhaps most important, they learned how to develop a plan for improvement to guide their actions and focus their attention on monitoring the outcomes of the activities they chose to implement. Targeted schools received additional funds for up to 3 years to be used for teacher training; extended day or Saturday tutorial programs; additional teachers to lower the student/teacher ratio or provide expertise in specific subject areas; manipulatives, books, and materials; and/or establishment of computer-assisted instruction laboratories. Funding amounts ranged from \$25,000 to \$150,000, depending on the size of the school and the severity of the problems.

Many of the schools that were targeted in 1993–94 are now recognized or exemplary schools. Schools that do not improve are analyzed for determination

**Table 12.1** Houston ISO Accountability System Ratings

<b>Rating</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>
Exemplary	84	10	20
Recognized	117	63	107
Acceptable	50	125	106
Low Acceptable	0	48	16
Low Performing	2	5	2

Source: HISD Research Report, p. 2

of appropriate actions. In some cases, a new administrative team is put in place or a significant portion of teachers are transferred. In another case, the school was totally restaffed. In most cases, however, the staff at the school has been able to improve and maintain its improved performance with the assistance of the targeted assistance team.

As Houston assessed its progress by school, it recognized that some schools were “gaming the system” by exempting groups of students whose performance might lower the school’s rating. Using its own accountability system, the district raised the bar. In March 1998, the superintendent of schools announced that there would be no exemptions from the HISD accountability system, except for those students with severe disabilities and unschooled immigrants who had been in America for less than one year. This reduced the percentage of students exempted from the state accountability system from 18.1 percent to 11 percent. The rate was even lower in the local Houston Independent School District (HISD) accountability system, which based accountability on both the alternative assessments as well as grade-level assessments counted in the state system. In 1999, the number of exemplary schools in the HISD accountability system dropped from 83 to 10, while low-performing and low-acceptable levels rose to 5 and 48, respectively. Within a year, schools whose ratings had fallen dramatically had followed the lessons of their hard-working colleagues and were once again climbing the matrix toward improved performance. In 2000, the numbers of schools with improved performance increased, as can be seen in [Table 12.1](#).

### **Addressing New Challenges**

Criticisms of the Texas education system were a regular ingredient in the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign. However, that criticism mistook the purpose of the phased-in system. It assumed the state and school districts are satisfied with high performance on TAAS, and it assumed that TAAS would remain at its current level of difficulty. However, neither is the case. As the interviews with the superintendents and board members in Aldine and Brazosport in the Koschoreck

and Skrla and Scheurich chapters made clear, TAAS was the starting point for improving performance, but it was not accepted as the highest standard or only measure of student achievement. Both districts cited the SAT/ACT scores in their districts, as well as performance in Advanced Placement (AP) courses as additional measures they were using to ensure higher levels of learning for all students. The TAAS is used as the floor for student performance, not the ceiling.

In 1997, the state moved to raise the bar on what students know and are able to do. It adopted Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) which specify what the student must know and be able to do at each grade level in each core subject. Revisions in TAAS will begin to reflect the new, more rigorous requirements, a move which has been spearheaded by the business community in conjunction with state legislators. In addition to more rigorous assessments at Grades 3–8, the state has added assessments in Grades 9 and 11 and has changed the 10th-grade assessment to reflect 10th-grade-level work. The exit-level TAAS, given at 11th grade starting in 2003, will require mastery of algebra and geometry, integrated physics and chemistry and biology, American and United States history, and 2 years of English. No student will receive a high-school diploma unless he or she passes all four sections of the exit-level test.

So where is Texas now? Districts have made major progress over the last decade, because of the stability of vision Texas has enjoyed since 1984. Districts have implemented many of the restructuring reforms that Newman and Wehlage (1995) discussed: shared decision making, school-improvement plans, and accountability. But as they pointed out, these reforms will not by themselves result in high levels of student achievement. Thus, it was important that the state also established a coherent curriculum and that educators used student achievement data to make decisions about teaching and learning. Students have made real progress on both TAAS and NAEP results as indicated in the Fuller and Johnson chapter. In fact, Hispanic and African-American students in Texas have made the greatest gains, as documented in that chapter.

The more important question is where does Texas go from here? Looking forward to the world in which current students will live, it is clear that learning to high levels is the new civil right. Schools must create environments in which every child is challenged and engaged. Principals, teachers, or counselors cannot make a priori decisions about which children can learn to high levels, which students are “gifted and talented material,” which children should be encouraged to go on to college. In a recent announcement of scholarship assistance by leaders in Houston, each of the leaders described how they had been told they were not “college material.” Fortunately they did not listen, but it raises the question of what is college material?

What comes next? Each school must establish learning communities in which everything is planned to ensure high levels of student learning for all students and in which all decisions foster increased levels of student achievement. This is a performance culture, where all decisions are made to further the accomplishment of the objectives of the organization. This must be true of all

decisions made by all people in the school, whether the principal is present or not. Ron Edmonds (1979) told us almost 25 years ago that we know what to do to ensure that minority students achieve at high levels, the only question is whether we have the will to do it. That is what Michael Fullan (1993) talks about when he sees teachers as moral change agents: “Today the teacher who works for or allows the status quo is the traitor. Purposeful change is the new norm in teaching.... It is time we realized that teachers above all are moral change agents in society—a role that must be pursued explicitly and aggressively.” (p. 14). Indeed, moral purpose is the reason why so many teachers went into education in the first place, and schools must build upon that commitment by creating environments that engage teachers in continuous improvement.

What is the challenge in achieving this? The districts cited in this volume, as well as the Houston Independent School District, have made a commitment to move beyond TAAS to focus on more rigorous performance standards. TAAS has created a firm floor to the state’s efforts to raise the level of student achievement to meet current and future societal needs. Each district must now create schools in which all students are engaged in high-quality student learning designed by teachers with a common vision of teaching. That vision should be based on authentic pedagogy as defined by Newman and Wehlage (1995)—teaching “that requires students to think, to develop in-depth understanding, and to apply academic learning to important, realistic problems” (p. 3). This will not be easy for many schools. It requires that schools, especially high schools, rethink all components of their programs.

These new expectations for principals, teachers, and students present a major challenge, but these expectations would never have been possible without the work of the last decade. The Texas system has produced improved student performance at every grade level and in every subject. Performance has improved for all identified subgroups as well as for grade levels on average. This process took over a decade to fully implement, but the systemic nature of the reform made it effective for the entire state. Houston has had even greater success than most districts, because it has fully utilized the state accountability system as well as its own accountability system to monitor and improve its professional development and the actual instruction carried out in classrooms. Its teachers and students are proud of the progress they have made, but they will not be satisfied until all students achieve mastery of TAAS and also excel on rigorous measures of student achievement, such as norm-referenced tests, the Scholastic Achievement Test and American College Testing programs, Advanced Placement examinations, and International Baccalaureate exams.

Clearly Texas should be proud that the work that has been done to date has resulted in good progress, but educators cannot stop there. All must commit to the continued learning required to move schools to the next level, where all students are highly educated in every classroom in Texas.

## References

- Edmonds, R.R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37 (1), 15–24.
- Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. Levittown, PA: Falmer.
- Houston Independent School District Department of Research and Accountability. (2000). *Houston Independent School District accountability system: 2000 results*. Houston, TX: Author.
- Newman, F.M., & Wehlage, G.G. (1995). *Successful school restructuring: A report to the public and educators*. Madison, WI: Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools.



# CHAPTER 13

## Statewide Assessment Triggers Urban School Reform

### *But How High the Stakes for Urban Minorities?*

LAURENCE PARKER

The chapters by Linda Skrla and James Joseph Scheurich, Edward Fuller and Joseph Johnson, and James Koschoreck in this part of this volume report on urban schools using social justice principles to enact meaningful reforms for African-American and Latino/Latina students through the use of state testing policy in Texas. The chapters offer readers a detailed analysis of teacher/administrator/community-led, pro-active policy initiatives in the contested political terrain of high stakes educational assessment accountability. The authors review the key findings of assessment measures and their deleterious impact on African-American and Latino/Latina children, as well as various efforts by schools and school districts in Texas to use the TAAS assessment requirements as an opportunity to raise the level of care about the academic welfare of African-American and Latino/Latina children in particular urban districts in Texas. This is very similar to efforts going on in other states like California and how some school districts have reacted to statewide assessment mandates with increased efforts to focus on the technical core of curriculum and instruction in mathematics (Cohen & Hill, 2000). The authors also do justice in discussing and showing overall support for the main points of the race-culture based movements to challenge the power of these tests and the state education agency to define minority education.

Despite the authors' implicit support of the overall goal to abolish testing and standardized assessment, they also realize that controversy surrounding this political/psychometric issue will not go away. Therefore, one can put forth a proposition borrowed from critical race theory's Derrick Bell (1995), of interest convergence, in that Whites will concede or agree to public policy changes that involve African Americans only if the White interest converges with the African-American interest. This major tenet of critical race theory is at first glance, a useful lens to see how the high-stakes state assessment was operationalized in the enactment and enforcement of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) with respect to raising minority-student passing rates. The results showed that the pressure of the tests placed the schools and school districts in the position of having to address raising racial achievement or face sanctions from the state. To be sure, there were schools and districts found indicating that the assessment program sanctions may not have been working in all of the districts.



However, the authors concluded that a social justice agenda could work, given the strength of political pressure placed at multiple levels to ensure minority-student success on high-stakes tests.

The salient feature of these articles lies in the descriptive statistics and qualitative data sources that document and contradict the assumed failure of urban African-American and Latino/Latina youth. Contrary to popular belief and what other mainstream and more conservative academics have discussed regarding the anti-intellectual culture of African Americans in particular, and other minority group students in general (for example, see works ranging from Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; to McWhorter, 2000; to Ogbu, 1994), there are successful efforts going on in classrooms, colleges, schools, and communities to secure equitable and challenging education for minority students (see chapters by L.Scott Miller, 1999; Phillip Uri Treisman, 1999; and Claude M.Steele, 1999, for example, regarding standardized testing and high school to post-secondary minority student achievement). My comments will briefly suggest possible ways in which the authors of these articles may want to build and explore different interpretations of the main points described in their research.

### **Critical Race Theory and Educational Testing: Does the Interest Convergence Theory Work for Racial Minorities on Matters of Assessment Policy?**

The authors should look at the article by Ernest R.House (1999) and what he discusses regarding how the converse of this theory maybe at work regarding high-stakes assessment and education. Whites will indeed tolerate any policies that have a harmful impact on racial minorities, but if the tables were turned and Whites suffered under these same policies, then they would work actively to change them. Thus, Whites have no problem accepting and even advocating for higher assessment standards or graderetention policies, even though, according to House (1999), much research shows how harmful these policies are to students, just as long as they primarily affect minority students in urban schools. However, once the policies affect Whites, particularly those in the suburbs, then Whites will react to change these policies. In the specific case of Texas and TAAS, we need to see descriptive statistics and qualitative data on how the test is or is not working with respect to White students. If the test's covert intent is to boost minority urban education achievement, then it is a targeted policy that basically lets White students "off the accountability hook" and this potential differential impact may need to be explored not only from a psychometric standpoint but also from a critique of Whiteness and White privilege in education (Thompson, 1999). For example, I think we can see this now in terms of the increasing suburban White parent backlash against high stakes testing and its impact on their children.

To be sure, White students in the cities have sporadically put forth testing challenges. However, the main ones legislators are paying close attention to are

those protests led by the White suburban families as they mount challenges to the high-stakes assessment measures in Wisconsin, Virginia, and other states, as the White student failure rate increases with the higher assessment requirements passed by their state boards of education (see Katzman & Hodas, 2000; Rossi, 2000; Sykes, 1999). This leads me to believe that once again, a “shell-game” of policy deception might be practiced regarding assessment in that once people of color believe they have utilized the master’s tools to improve on the standardized tests, then the master comes out with either new tools or new rules to follow in order evaluate students that in turn puts our minority students further behind. We might be seeing this scenario play out if in the future Texas assessment policy changes result in minority students doing well on TAAS but still failing to make substantial progress in preparation for post-secondary education.<sup>1</sup>

### **Racial/Gender Policy Questions for Consideration**

After reading the articles, I was still left with some other questions that I hope the authors can answer in the future such as: (1) Given the trouble that the Austin school district faced regarding cheating on some of the tests to improve minority and low-income student scores, can we be sure that the test results reported are accurate? Do even larger problems arise in metropolitan districts like Houston, and do we see intractable urban racial problems with TAAS that are mirrored in smaller communities that have sizable racial minorities while the town’s political and economic power is dominated by conservative White school leaders and is racially polarized (Bartee, et.al, 2000; Spring, 1998); (2) What are the specific differences among the students when categories are combined? What I mean here is, what is the African-American male versus female passing rate on TAAS? Are we seeing what is happening in other schools, namely that the African-American student success has been built around the efforts of the female students? Do we see similar effects for Latinas too?; (3) Which groups are excluded from the tests? Special education students? Are students who are expelled or suspended given the chance to take the test in their alternative school settings, and what are the results of ESL/bilingual education students and recent immigrant Asian/Pacific island students on TAAS?; (4) What is the cut-score on the test and what content does the test cover in the areas of math, science, and writing? What testing company has been contracted to develop this test and what is their track record regarding racial/gender equity and testing?

These questions deserve answers because as Lucas (2000) has pointed out, the problems of test design, implementation, and the test’s racial and social-class impact have had a tremendous discriminatory impact on the type of items placed on a test and whose interests these items serve regarding a plethora of item-bias issues. A key technical question needs to be asked regarding which items on the test may act as possible distracters, which in turn lower the minority scores. A related problem in Illinois that has surfaced with high-stakes assessment measures and their impact on diverse students has been the changing of

multiracial content from children's books that in turn were used as direct sources of questions for statewide 3rd-grade reading achievement test.

This change caused test validity and reliability problems because the characters were changed to all-White in an assumed norm of Whiteness on standardized norm-referenced assessment tests (Puch, 2000). Finally, despite the higher African-American and Latino/Latina rates of achievement reported by the authors in this issue, their data show that the White rate is still higher, and in some instances it is 10%–13% higher. So despite the gains, African Americans for example, still have not reached parity with Whites. This maybe due to the fact that in some urban schools (e.g., Houston) teaching has been directed toward improving the test scores, although the poor quality of educational programs and teacher racial biases in classrooms may have a more deleterious impact on minority students (McNeil, 2000; September 18, 2000, personal communication with a former middle school teacher who taught in the Houston public schools).<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusion

As a result, even though the gap has narrowed, the persistent assessment disparities between African-American, Latino/Latina, some Asian-American (e.g., Chinese-American, Korean-American of certain generations), and White European-American student scores has already led to the re-emergence of the belief in the racial/cultural deficit model of lower educational achievement for these minority groups (McWhorter, 2000). Since Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1785 (1995) in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that blacks lacked reasoning and intelligence compared to Whites and Tribal Nation Indians, this ideology of black inferiority related to intelligence has had “face-validity” support among the majority in the United States as race became the central normative focus of shaping North-American culture and identity connected to the evolving system of empire conquest and enslavement (Smedley, 1999; Winant, 1999).

Given this focus, coupled with the long history of racism connected to intelligence and standardized testing, the major question that I feel really needs to be put forth for policy change is why are we not challenging the use of these tests on our children and students and instead developing and implementing different racially culture-based assessments (Hood, 1998), as opposed to resigning ourselves to accepting the state board's policy agenda? We now have President George W. Bush, who campaigned on the success of TAAS and on how his state was the leader in helping minority students achieve. Yet we also know based on the recent past that the conservative agenda that he represents has resulted in harmful policy effects on the quality of life and education of African Americans and other racial minorities (Feagin, 2000; Lugg, 1996). Therefore, what we need to fight for now is critical race theory, praxis, and action in educational policy analysis, and assessment for true equity and social justice,

instead of the false opportunity presented by “compassionate” conservatism (Parker, 2000).

### Notes

1. The authors of chapters 10 and 11 dispute Haney’s (2000) data analysis. Yet, there still needs to be some acknowledgment of the fact that he found that minority students, who have seemingly improved on TAAS, fared worse on TASP (Texas Readiness Test for Postsecondary Education) with percentage points dropping from 65.2% to 43.3% between 1994 and 1997.
2. To be sure, there are core differences in the use of the terms, assessment, evaluation, and testing. However, for the purposes of this response, I am choosing to link statewide testing with assessment since this is what has had the most crucial effect on African Americans and Latinos/Latinas.

### References

- Bartee, R.S., Beckham, J., Gill, C, Graves, C, Jackson, K., Land, R., Williams, D., & Parker, L. (2000). Race, discipline, and educational leadership: African American student perspectives on the Decatur, IL incident. *Journal of Special Education Leadership* 13,19–29.
- Bell, D.A., Jr. (1995). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest convergence dilemma. In K.Crenshaw, N.Gotanda, G.Peller, & K.Thomas (Eds.). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement* (pp. 20–28). New York: The New Press.
- Cohen, D.K., & Hill, H.C. (2000). Instructional policy and classroom performance: The mathematics reform in California. *Teachers College Record* 102, 294–343.
- Feagin, J.R. (2000). *Racist America: Roots, current realities, and future reparations*. New York: Routledge.
- Haney, W. (2000). The myth of the Texas miracle in education. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(41). Retrieved January 3, 2003, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41>
- Hernstein, R.J., & Murray, C. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hood, S. (1998). Culturally responsive performance-based assessment: Conceptual and psychometric considerations. *Journal of Negro Education* 67,187–97.
- House, E.R. (1999). Race and policy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 7(16) [On-line journal]. Available <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n16.html>
- Jefferson, T. [1785] (1995). *Notes on the state of Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Katzman, J., & Hodas, S. (2000, April 9). The trouble with tests. *New York Times*, 4A, p. 36.
- Lucas, S.R. (2000). Hope, anguish, and the problem of our time: An essay on publication of *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. *Teachers College Record* 102, 461–73.
- Lugg, C.A. (1996). *For god and country: Conservatism and American school policy*. New York: Peter Lang.

- McNeil, L.M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- McWhorter, J. (2000). *Losing the race: Black Americans and intellectual self-sabotage*. New York: The Free Press.
- Miller, L.S. (1999). Promoting high academic achievement among non-Asian minorities. In E.Y.Lowe, Jr. (Ed.), *Promise and dilemma: Perspectives on racial diversity and higher education* (pp. 47–91). Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Ogbu, J.U. (1994). Racial stratification and education in the United States: Why inequality persists. *Teachers College Record*, 96,264–98.
- Parker, L. (2000, Jan.). *The utility of critical race theory for educational evaluation and policy analysis*. Paper presented at the Race 2000 Conference, Tempe, AZ.
- Puch, D. (2000, Feb. 17). Black characters depicted as White in tests. *The Champaign-Urbana News Gazette*, pp. A1, A8.
- Rossi, R. (2000, Feb. 18). Testing limits to limit testing. *Chicago Sun-Times*, pp. 1–2.
- Smedley, A. (1999). *Race in North America: Origin and evolution of a world view* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Spring, J. (1998). *Conflict of interest: The politics of American education* (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Steele, C.M. (1999). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. In E.Y.Lowe, Jr. (Ed.), *Promise and dilemma: Perspectives on racial diversity and higher education* (pp. 92–128). Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Sykes, C. (1999, Dec. 6). Soccer moms vs. standardized tests. *New York Times*, p. A29.
- Thompson, A. (1999). Color talk: Whiteness and off White. *Educational Studies*, 30, 141–60.
- Treisman, P.U. (1999). A practitioner's view from Texas: Comments on the essays by L.Scott Miller and Claude M.Steele. In E.Y.Lowe, Jr. (Ed.). *Promise and dilemma: Perspectives on racial diversity and higher education* (pp. 129–34). Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Winant, H. (1999, Aug.). *Toward a comparative historical sociology of race*. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.

# CHAPTER 14

## Promoting Educational Equity in a Period of Growing Social Inequity

### *The Silent Contradictions of Texas Reform Discourse*

GARY L. ANDERSON

Since the appearance of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, and several subsequent reports, public schools have been viewed as being in “crisis.” Neoconservatives see a moral crisis and the collapse of traditional views of family, religion, and individual character. Neoliberals link the crisis to human capital theory, arguing that our schools have failed to provide U.S. corporations with a competitive workforce—an argument more compelling in 1983 than today. Others, including the editors of this book, see the real crisis as a system that reflects and reproduces the savage inequalities of our society (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Kozol, 1991). While I welcome this shift in the current discourse of crisis from moralizing and human capital theory to equity, I believe that education professionals who, like these authors, work under an equity umbrella need to be more explicit about both the substantive and strategic issues entailed in achieving social justice for poor and minority children and their families.

Therefore, my response to these three chapters (9, 10, and 11) will dwell less on the specifics and more on their claims to address the plight of poor and minority children through the Texas accountability system. Along with the Fuller and Johnson chapter in this edition, I have painstakingly read several other statistical analyses of the Texas reform (Carnoy, Loeb, & Smith, 2000; Haney, 2000; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000). They appear to be about equally divided in their support or criticism of the Texas accountability reforms. As I read these chapters and papers, I felt a sense of *déjà vu*, having read so many pro and con statistical reports on bilingual education, on the reading “wars,” and, more recently, on vouchers and charter schools. Despite the current obsession with “research-based practices,” these research debates, which often revolve around arcane statistical minutiae, resolve little for two reasons. First, they say more about the dilemmas of appropriating research methods from the physical sciences to complex social and human endeavors than anything substantive about teaching, learning, or children. Second, they argue over numbers when the problems are largely conceptual. What do we mean by “equity?” What do we mean by “reading?” What do we mean by “learning?” What do we mean by “accountability?” And accountability to whom, and within what broader sociohistorical context? Such statistical debates avoid larger foundational questions relating to the goals of schooling in our society and in

whose interest we educate. So I will not address the Fuller and Johnson paper directly, not because I don't think their data is plausible, but because it is no more or less plausible than, say, the second RAND study (Klein et al., 2000) which reaches different conclusions.

Relying as it does largely on a handful of superintendent interviews, the qualitative research reported in [chapter 9](#) does not, in my opinion, adequately reflect the editors' study of four exemplary Texas school districts. Therefore, I have also read other articles in which the authors have laid out in more detail their qualitative evidence and I recommend these to the reader (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson 2000; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000). These authors may ultimately do for school districts what the effective schools research did for schools. We need a lot more research that documents how effective districts achieve systemic reform and, more importantly, how this translates to the classroom. But I will only briefly address the qualitative studies because I am convinced that the most compelling issues are conceptual.

**“Do you have problem with 90% of poor, minority students  
passing the TAAS?”**

On a personal note, I have followed the work of these authors over the last few years as they have presented their data at various conferences. I also views and commitment to social justice. I first heard of their research when count them as friends who generally share my own politically progressive I ran into Jim Scheurich at a conference in Los Angeles a few years ago. In the few moments we tend to catch up on each other's work between conference sessions, he told me that he and his colleagues were seeing some really good results in some Texas school districts that were implementing basic things we all know work—stuff like effective schools research. Starved for some good news, I was delighted and told him to send me their findings.

Shortly thereafter, I received an email from Linda Skrla with data from a handful of Texas school districts that startled me. These were districts in which over 90% of low-income, minority students were passing the TAAS. I was impressed, but suspicious. Like Schrag (2000), I found the data too good to be true. I began to wonder if the test was non-rigorous, what passing rates were set, and whether savvy teachers had simply taught to the test. I wondered if the test was norm-referenced or criterion-referenced and how many low-performing or limited English proficient kids were kept home the day of the test. I wondered how poor and minority students compared on overall scores as opposed to passing rates. As a former principal, I knew all the tricks that many administrators use to “enhance” school data. Then I wondered if I wasn't perhaps myself a victim of low-expectations. Did I really believe that poor and minority kids couldn't perform at high levels? After all, the one thing researchers always control for in comparing groups of kids on any achievement variable is socioeconomic status. It's built into our very research methods.

Shortly after I received Linda's data, she introduced me to Gerald Anderson, the former superintendent of Brazosport quoted in Skrla and Scheurich's [chapter 9](#). Chatting with him at a conference reception, I raised several doubts about the wisdom of using high-stakes testing as a route to school reform. He abruptly asked me if I had a problem with over 90% of poor and minority students passing the TAAS. I responded at the time with a rambling "it depends" sort of answer, but I think that it is a fair question that deserves a more thoughtful response.

Some commentators on the Texas Accountability System have responded, yes, they do have a problem with it, arguing that disaggregating test scores by race and class and then providing a test-oriented education to minority and poor students has created a "new discrimination." According to McNeil (2000),

This disaggregating of scores gives the appearance that the system is sensitive to diversity and committed to improving minority children's education. This reporting, however, actually exacerbates growing inequities, because the push to raise the minority scores leads to a focus on the test to the exclusion of many other forms of education, (p. 233)

I don't think that McNeil is suggesting that the intent of disaggregating test scores is to disadvantage poor and minority students—on the contrary—it is touted as a way to expose and document inequities in the system. However, one of the few nearly law-like findings that applied social science has produced is the notion that well-intended policies tend to have some negative, unintended consequences.

For example, Ogawa, Stine, and Huston (1998) found that the recent class-size reduction reform in California had the unintended result of creating more jobs in better-paying suburban districts, leaving poorer districts scrambling to fill openings with non-certified teachers. Poor children in Los Angeles have fewer kids in their classes, but they are taught by less experienced and less qualified teachers. Furthermore, poor districts lack extra classrooms and the resources to build extra classrooms to accommodate smaller classes. In one Los Angeles elementary school, four classes met in the multipurpose room. Do I have a problem with poor, minority kids having smaller class sizes? It depends.

Others have a problem with the high TAAS passing rates, because they feel the obsession with the test narrows and impoverishes the curriculum, creating opportunity costs that lead to the elimination of more in-depth analysis of critical social issues. As the state takes a stronger role in curriculum and testing, using equity as the justification, standardized testing can become a more sophisticated technology of control—a form of official surveillance that controls populations through normalization (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998). Bigelow (1999), a high-school social studies teacher is eloquent on this point:



I want the State to abandon its effort to turn me into a delivery system of approved social information. I want it to support me and other teachers as we collaborate to create curriculum that deals forthrightly with social problems, that fights racism and social injustice. I want it to acknowledge the legitimacy of a multicultural curriculum of critical questions, complexity, multiple perspectives, and social imagination. I want it to admit that wisdom is more than information, that the world can't be chopped up into multiple choice questions and that you can't bubble in the truth with a number two pencil. (Bigelow, 1999, p. 40)

Thus many social justice advocates, including the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), have opposed the Texas accountability system in spite of its espoused equity goals.

This intensified surveillance is also evident in what the authors elsewhere call “proactive redundancy” which ensures a tightening up of “loosely coupled systems” that allow a degree of professional autonomy for teachers. Proactive redundancy involves things like principals making weekly visits to classrooms to examine teaching and targeted monthly testing to ensure that specified goals are being accomplished. There is great concern in many quarters that high-stakes testing and the lessening of professional discretion in most districts—though perhaps not the four studied by the authors included here—is causing many of our best teachers to leave teaching.

But let's assume for the sake of argument that TAAS test scores represent genuine learning gains and a closing of the achievement gap in favor of poor and minority children in Texas. Even a Grinch would have to acknowledge that this was a good thing. Clearly, we need more indicators of success than pass rates on a minimum competency test, a point the authors have acknowledged, but even if the gains are not sufficient to claim a “Texas miracle,” our answer to Gerald Anderson would have to be, “No, I don't have a problem with 90% of poor and minority students passing the TAAS.” I do have a problem, however, with some of the inferences and claims the authors make relative to larger issues of social justice.

### **School Reform by Itself Cannot Leverage Social Justice.**

At the 2000 Annual Meeting of American Educational Research Association (AERA) in New Orleans, I participated in a symposium organized by the editors entitled, “Accountability for Equity: Can State Policy Leverage Social Justice?” Although the term “equity” is more prevalent in these chapters than “social justice,” it is important to clarify exactly what kinds of equity claims the authors are making. It is these claims to leverage equity/social justice that I wish to dwell on here because they are the main reason I took an interest in the Texas reforms.

I know that the authors are genuine in their desire for greater justice in American society. These authors are not part of the cynical politics of the Right,

which dresses up their conservative reforms in the language of equity and concern for the plight of the poor. Although the term “social justice” has recently, through overuse, been gutted of any particular meaning, it has generally been associated with a more equitable distribution of resources in society. Most theorists today would define resources in terms of economic, social, and cultural forms of capital. Clearly education is a form of cultural capital and its more equitable distribution is a legitimate goal of the authors. However, I believe the authors need to at least attempt to explore the relationship of gains in cultural capital to social and economic capital. They need to make clear the distinction between educational equity (dramatically closing the achievement gap in schools) and social equity (dramatically closing the income and resource gap in society). This is because in the past 2 decades we have seen an inequitable redistribution of economic and social capital that has made social equity more elusive than at any time in our history since the 1920s. The lack of a discussion as to why educational equity is on the front burner precisely at the same time that our society is becoming increasingly inequitable makes the author’s defense of Texas reform seem less convincing and at times naïve.

For instance, in a Dana Center paper, Joe Johnson (1998), one of the authors in this volume, equates Texas School Reform with the legacy of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society legislation:

The greatest promise of school reform is a nation in which one cannot predict the relative academic achievement of children by examining variables such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, or language background: a nation in which all children have real opportunities to reap the benefits of our political and economic systems, whether their families live in suburbs or barrios, gated communities or ghettos, mansions or homeless shelters. This was the promise that undergirded Lyndon Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary School Act. (p. 1)

This quote, in my opinion, illustrates a fundamental flaw in social justice claims coming out of the Texas Reform. It calls for closing the education gap, while failing to problematize the growing social and economic gaps. The language of “no excuses” and “zero tolerance” of the current accountability movement seems to silence any discussion of the savage inequalities that are illustrated by the above quote. Under the hegemony of a discourse of high expectations, calling attention to the disparities of children living in homeless shelters and mansions that characterizes current American society is classified as “making excuses.”

Lyndon Johnson’s program was a coordinated one, recognizing that redistributing a type of cultural capital like education was not sufficient to leverage social justice; thus, his programs covered redistribution of cultural (e.g., education), social (e.g., day care, health care, community centers, social networks, etc.), and economic (i.e., income, pensions, a progressive tax code, etc.) capital. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) have pointed out, education reformers have

throughout recent history colluded in “blaming schools for not solving problems beyond their reach. More important, the Utopian tradition of social reform through schooling has often diverted attention from more costly, politically controversial, and difficult societal reforms” (p. 3). As advocates of school reform, I believe it is our obligation to let the public know what the inherent limits of school reform are in solving social problems. Otherwise, we allow schools to be a convenient scapegoat for social problems and a reason not to address those mechanisms—some as basic as our tax code—that are ultimately much more effective in reallocating resources. As I write this the Bush administration is proposing a \$1.7 billion-dollar tax cut, one half of which will go to those in the top 10% income bracket.

### Substantive versus Strategic Issues

The authors are not unaware of the issues I have raised thus far, which leads me to wonder if it doesn't perhaps make more sense to see these chapters as staking out a strategic position, based on lowered political expectations, rather than a substantive one. Otherwise it is hard to understand why they so thoroughly ignore the growing lack of social equity in the United States which forms the broader context for the Texas reforms. While I don't wish to attribute motives to the authors, I'd like to speculate on why it might make sense to support the Texas reform from a more pragmatic position.

Because the political climate that accompanied the Great Society reforms of the 1970s was far more liberal than it is today, it may simply be more prudent to focus on those areas, like education, in which we might have some small success. In other words, perhaps we need to lower our expectations of social equity gains. Let's face it, the political left, while making gains through new social movements organized around gender, disability, sexuality, and—to a lesser extent—race, were soundly defeated on the economic front. Perhaps this is why the authors have elsewhere asked “in what *historical moment* has there ever been a major public commitment to high academic performance for all races and socioeconomic classes of students by both major U.S. political parties and their candidates for president?” (Scheurich, et al., 2000). Are the authors suggesting that, in *this historical moment*, this is the best we can do, so we should ride this political bandwagon? Even if we were to believe that the commitment to which the authors refer is more than rhetorical, it is hard to imagine anyone characterizing this historical moment as one in which social justice—however defined—is valued.

The problem I have with strategically supporting the Texas reforms is that we are ultimately supporting a conservative corporate agenda—one that heavily lobbies and funds both major political parties, and one that does not have the welfare of poor and minority children at its core (Derber, 1998). If the welfare of poor and minority children has suddenly entered the radar screen of the corporate agenda, it is because they are viewed as potential human capital.

I suppose one could argue that we should take advantage of this sudden discursive attention to poor and minority students anyway. After all, postmodern theory has taught us that particular discourses cannot be said to belong to particular groups or positions. They can be articulated in varying ways and with varying underlying strategies. The current high-stakes testing and accountability reforms emerged as part of a human capital discourse following the 1983 Nation at Risk report. Although the link between schooling and the economy has been found to be weak (Levin, 1998), this view has wide appeal and is used to justify pressure to raise scores of poor and minority students, arguing that they are needed in the more skilled workforce in order for the country to be competitive globally.

However, McNeil (2000) points out an apparent contradiction in the type of reform that corporate leaders have championed in Texas.

In this particular state, economic chaos gave rise to the thought that schools should create certainties, should test and be held accountable to standardized measures. Yet, the same educational commissions and legislative packages calling for standardization demanded that public schools somehow provide the imaginative, intellectual “capital” needed for a high technology future, (p. 156)

McNeil wonders why Texas opted for a nineteenth-century, industrial management model of reform in the context of a “new economy” based on a highly technological and inventive workplace. The answer is borne out by data that shows that only 20% of new jobs require professionals with this new imaginative, intellectual capital (Derber, 1998). Although it is true that the new global economy will produce fewer non-skilled jobs, most new jobs will require only minimal literacy skills. These new high-tech assembly-line and service jobs, although requiring more literacy and numeracy skills, are unlike the old unionized blue collar assembly lines in another way. Today’s new semiskilled jobs that await poor and minority kids have low wages, few benefits and pension plans, little job security, and no union protections. Thus, the new economy will need some highly creative and rigorous thinkers, but mostly it will need armies of de-politicized, but literate workers for assembly-line-type high-tech and service work.

In our rush to reject the overly deterministic correspondence and social reproduction theories of the 1970s, we may be ignoring what corporate planners take for granted. The educational system is stratified along the lines of the skills needed by business and industry. Are we preparing poor and minority students to be more accepting and docile high-tech assembly-line workers for the non-union high-tech and service sectors, or are we empowering them to both have the skills to survive within the system while working to make it more equitable and democratic? Because human capital theory is popular, and democratic and social

reconstructivist theories of the left are not, should we abandon them, and pragmatically work within discourses that we do not support?

### Legitimation Rituals

Citing Meyer and Rowan's (1977) work on legitimation, Skrla and Scheurich (this volume, [chapter 9](#)) suggest that superintendents in Texas used to engage in the maintenance of basic structures and rituals of schooling—such as Friday night football—while ignoring inequitable learning outcomes. In this way, they argue, these superintendents were able to maintain the public confidence and the legitimacy of schooling as an enterprise. They argue that administrators could get away with this until the Texas accountability system forced them to account for these inequities. The authors' point is well taken, and for those districts that do not resort to “short cuts” to equitable student outcomes, valid. However, there may be another legitimation ritual employed on the national level of school reform.

Dennis (1995) suggests that a return to business ideology and human capital discourses in education during the last 2 decades of the 20th century may partly be a strategic response to a perceived crisis of legitimacy of public education and the perceived threat of privatization.

The energetic adoption of corporatist public relations and administrative practices is a defensive tactic meant to counter a perceived threat. It is a tactic in a strategy designed to retain a much modified modicum of control of resources by retrenching educational bureaucracies. By adopting the “walk and talk” of TNC [transnational corporations] practices and ideologies, administrators hope to reduce pressures to formally privatize schools. That is, if the public schools look and sound like a corporation and if they produce graduates that conform to TNC expectations (skilled, mobile, docile, and interchangeable), then political and market pressures to dismantle these bureaucracies will be eased, (p. 9)

If Dennis is right, then Texas Reform could be viewed as an attempt to save public education from corporate entrepreneurs by creating greater legitimacy for public education. One could even argue, based on this position that educational professionals should support high-stakes accountability as a legitimation ritual (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) that represents a wedge against a growing privatization movement. Gerald Anderson's slogan “effective schools research meets Total Quality Management” might seem conservative, but as a wedge against those who promote schools as for-profit Education Maintenance Organizations (EMOs)—education's version of HMOs—it seems like a legitimation strategy worth considering *at this historical moment*. I find it difficult to believe that those thousands of educators who have bought into business principles for running schools are doing so for the strategic reason that Dennis suggests. Nevertheless, the growing threat of privatization and the recent success of for-profit corporations, like Edison and Advantage, makes one wonder if such a strategy might be worth adopting. However, if we accept this defensive strategy, we must

be honest about the fact that it is those of us on the “left” who have drastically lowered our expectations about the level of progress we can make toward social justice goals in this historical moment.

My concern is that in attempting to legitimate public schooling through a depoliticized discourse of high stakes testing, we may end up legitimizing a discourse that further marginalizes more authentic attempts to link educational equity issues to broader social equity issues. Other reform efforts, in my opinion, do a better job of making these links. The Coalition of Essential Schools also has an explicit equity concern, and while it lacks the systemic aspect of the Texas accountability system, its accountability measures are more qualitative and less likely to distort instruction and curriculum for poor and minority children. Meier (2000) suggests that “the state, and the academy, should nudge, persuade, expose, even embarrass, but do so from a far deeper analysis than we get from test scores.” (p. 84)

Like Accelerated Schools, Comer Schools, and Alliance Schools, Coalition schools place more confidence in the professionalism of teachers and the power of communities. At least at a discursive level, the Texas reform has a deficit model of teachers and a view that students can perform well in spite of their homes and communities. At the heart of the “no excuses” discourse is a view of poor and minority communities and their funds of knowledge as deficient.

Shirley (1997), another Texas researcher, also provides a dimension of school reform that is missing in these articles. Shirley describes how the Industrial Areas Foundation has organized poor and minority communities throughout Texas to pressure schools to improve the education of their children. A community organizing perspective provides for change that is grounded in the community and which sees schools as only one arena that needs to change if poor and minority children are to be truly empowered. In contrast, current Texas school reform is a classic case of social engineering that is directed from sources outside the children’s communities.

On balance, the disaggregation of test scores by race and class is a positive development, but the authors need to better supplement the test scores and other indicators with qualitative data from classrooms that convince skeptics like myself that poor and minority children are receiving a better overall education because this conversation has taken place. The six researchers of the qualitative study made two, 3-day visits to the four districts under study (Skrla, et al., 2000). Even if the researchers fanned out throughout the districts to gather data, this is insufficient time to gather the kind of systematic classroom data that would be required to make such a case.

While I’m willing to accept that deficit thinking has been reduced in teachers and administrators, I have looked in vain for evidence of how this has played out behaviorally in classrooms. One of the authors’ findings— mostly derived from superintendent testimonials—is that effective superintendents impact instruction, but we need a clearer idea of how this filters into classrooms. For instance, well documented classroom-oriented programs, like Reading Recovery, have

demonstrated why they help kids learn to read more effectively. In the absence of these kinds of data, all we see anecdotally, in most Texas schools and in other parts of the country, is scripted programs peddled by corporate vendors, a new army of highly paid educational consultants, and the creation of a testing culture in schools. Even if these data can be presented for these four exemplary districts—or even 40 (out of over 1,000 districts in the state of Texas), how do we ensure that high quality education for poor and minority children will occur in a sufficient number of districts to compensate for the negative effects of high-stakes accountability described by McNeil (2000), who found that the Texas accountability system was undermining good teaching in the magnet schools she studied?

But, unlike magnet schools, typical inner-city schools across the country have rarely experienced consistently good teaching, which makes some feel that anything would be better than the current state of affairs. These are desperate times for those families who have no option but inner-city schools that fail to educate their children. Such desperation has led many poor and minority families to support vouchers and other privatization plans. For the most part, those who support educational and social equity generally agree that privatization will ultimately lower even more the quality of education for poor and minority children. Therefore, it is imperative that we carefully analyze current public-school reform efforts that show a potential for turning the second class education that poor and minority children currently receive into a first class education. But by the same token, we must be certain that these well-intended reforms do not end up providing them with a third-class education in the name of increasing test scores. It would be ironic indeed if an equity-driven reform were to ultimately disempower the very children that school reformers are allegedly attempting to empower.

## References

- Anderson, G.L., & Grinberg, J. (1998). Educational administration as a disciplinary practice: Appropriating Foucault's view of power, discourse, and method. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 34(3), 329–53.
- Berliner, D., & Biddle, B. (1995). *The manufactured crisis: Myths, fraud, and the attack on America's public schools*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Bigelow, B. (1999). Why standardized tests threaten multiculturalism. *Educational Leadership* 56(7), 37–40
- Carnoy, M., Loeb, S., & Smith, T.L. (2000). *Do higher state test scores in Texas make for better high school outcomes?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.
- Dennis, D. (1995). Brave new reductionism. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 3(9), 1–20.
- Derber, C. (1998). *Corporation nation: How corporations are taking over our lives and what we can do about it*. New York: St. Martins.

- Haney, W. (2000). The myth of the Texas miracle in education. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives* 8(41). Retrieved January 3, 2003, from: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41>
- Johnson, J.F. (1998). *The promise of school reform in Texas*. Austin, TX: The Charles Dana Center.
- Klein, S.P., Hamilton, L.S., McCaffrey, D.F., & Stecher, B.M. (2000). *What do test scores in Texas tell us?* (RAND Education Issue Paper). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Harper.
- Levin, H. (1998). Educational performance standards and the economy. *Educational Researcher* 27(4), 4–10.
- McNeil, L. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: The educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- Meier, D. (2000). *Will standards save public education?* Boston: Beacon.
- Meyer J., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology* 83(2), 341–63.
- Ogawa, R., Stine, D., & Huston, D. (1998). *California's class-size reduction initiative: Differences in teacher experience and qualifications across schools*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 424628)
- Scheurich, J.J., Skrla, L., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). Thinking carefully about equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 82(4), 293–9.
- Schrag, P. (2000). Too good to be true. *American Prospect* 3, 46–9.
- Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement-focused school districts: A report on systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations*. Austin, TX: Charles A.Dana Center.
- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward Utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.





# CHAPTER 15

## **Polar Positions on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)**

### *Pragmatism and the Politics of Neglect*

HENRY T.TRUEBA

The history of neglect that has characterized the academic achievement of children of color and children from low-incomes may be facing an unexpected turn of events created by pragmatic politicians. Politicians, administrators, and even these children's families, who want to share in the expected benefits from education, are seeking genuine change. This does not necessarily mean that deficit thinking is being eradicated, nor that a new religion of care and love for all children has been discovered in the academic circles, in teacher education, or in staff development programs, or in superintendents' seminars. No, the motivation seems to be primarily pragmatic and political. School personnel want economic and social rewards, such as security of employment, better salaries, political support, recognition, and upward mobility.

While the debate continues from the two extremes in academia, some for and others against TAAS, the overall performance of the Texas schools and in particular of low-income, Limited English Proficient (LEP), African-American, and Latino children, is improving radically, at least, according to the scholars who support the state system of accountability. The purpose of this brief review is to present arguments on both sides of the issue and to explore these arguments. I then consider what can help us better understand this new phenomenon of change from above, this legislated equity from the top down, and this forced compliance with a testing system viewed by some as progress and by others as anathema, or at least as inappropriate and insensitive.

In spite of the bitter opposition, in principle, both sides tend to agree that the basis for the instructional neglect of children of color and low-income children is deficit thinking, that is, prejudice (racial, socioeconomic, etc.), and that such way of thinking should not be tolerated in American education. Furthermore, while most educators (for or against the TAAS) would agree with the assumption that schools have an obligation to teach all students, we all recognize the fact that deficit thinking affects our judgment and actions in education. Many of us, educators, tend to think that students who fail in school have internal deficiencies (cognitive, emotional, motivational, social, and cultural), and, as a consequence, they suffer clear dysfunctions that exonerate us from the obligation to teach them successfully. As Skrla and Scheurich write, we construct the "at risk" concept to include precisely the poor, those who speak other languages or have other

cultures, and those who look different from mainstream Whites. Also, academicians have developed a complex process to justify deficit thinking: an inventory of deficits, a sophisticated explanation such deficits, a predictive system for the occurrence and perpetuation of deficits, and a range of possible interventions (tracking, remediation, classification as disabled, and other mechanisms of marginalization).

### **The TAAS Seems Viable and Beneficial**

The [chapter 10](#) of this volume, by Edward Fuller and Joseph Johnson is very persuasive. The virtue of the state accountability system is that, in spite of bitter criticism by others, it has clearly improved dramatically the performance of minority and low-income children in Texas and has resulted in significant instructional changes in many school districts. They present not only the statistical distribution of the English TAAS scores in reading and math for 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10; and the writing scores for 4, 8, and 10, for each category of students (African American, Hispanic, low-income, LEP, and White), but also the scores for the Spanish TAAS for Grades 3, 4, 5, and 6. To this information they add the rankings of the Texas students in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and they advance powerful reasoning in response to their opponents. To simplify matters, I have selectively compressed scores for 1994 and 2000, noting the points gained.

Two additional findings are relevant here. The Spanish version results suggest drastic improvements from 1997 to 2000 in reading, writing and math, and the Texas rankings in the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 1990 to 1996 suggest that Texas students (especially African American and Hispanic) have increased their ratios in test-taking and have moved up in rankings, thus closing the achievement gap with Whites. In 1996, for Grade 4 math, in comparison with those in California, Florida, and New York (the largest states), Texas African Americans rank 1st, Hispanics 6th, and economically disadvantaged 1st. In the same year, for 8th-grade math, African Americans ranked 4th, Hispanics 8th, and low-income 10th. However, the rankings for the other states are way below those of Texas. California's African Americans are at the bottom (36th out of 37 states) in 4th-grade math, and they rank 24th in 8th-grade math. The 4th-grade reading ranking for Texas Hispanics in 1998 was 6th in the nation, and their 8th-grade reading ranking was 2nd.

In addition, Fuller and Johnson claim, Advanced Placement for African Americans and Hispanics has also improved significantly, and while there is a continued debate as to how to classify and count drop-outs, there is no evidence that TAAS has caused additional drop-out phenomena or has in any way affected their count. In brief, accountability has made people more responsible and more responsive, and it has forced us to pay attention to the needs of all kids, especially kids of color and children from low-income homes, and most educators have realized the need for staff development. What has made the

**Table 15.1** Percent of Students Passing TAAS 1994 and 2000

<b>% of students passing reading:</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Gain (pts)</b>
All students	74	87	13
African American	58	80	22
Hispanic	63	81	18
Low-Income	61	80	19
LEP	39	60	21
White	85	94	9

<b>% of students passing writing:</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Gain (pts)</b>
All students	76	88	12
African American	63	82	19
Hispanic	67	82	15
Low-Income	65	81	16
LEP	44	60	16
White	85	94	9

<b>% of students passing math:</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Gain (pts)</b>
All students	57	87	30
African American	36	76	40
Hispanic	45	83	38
Low-Income	43	81	38
LEP	44	60	16
White	70	93	23

difference is not so much testing, but the use of disaggregated data, and the pressure put on districts to improve the performance of all students. These authors recognize that Texas system is far from perfect.

### **The TAAS System of Testing is Harmful, Inappropriate, and Insensitive**

Arguments have been presented by Linda McNeil (2000) and McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) to demonstrate that TAAS is unacceptable. Here is a summary of their arguments:

1. The TAAS system of testing reduces the quality and quantity of curriculum;
2. The TAAS system distorts the educational expenditures, diverting scarce instructional dollars away from such high quality curriculum resources as laboratory supplies and books and toward testprep materials and activities of limited instructional value;

3. TAAS provokes instruction that is aimed at the lowest level of skills and information, and it crowds out other forms of learning, particularly for poor and minority students;
4. TAAS-based teaching and test-prep violates what is known about how children learn;
5. The TAAS is divorced from children's experience and culture;
6. The test is imposing exit measures that are particularly inappropriate for LEP students; and
7. TAAS is widening the gap between the education of children in Texas' poorest (historically low-performing) schools and that available to more privileged children.

The TAAS has serious consequences for students' academic promotion, as well as for teachers, principals, and superintendents. McNeil and Valenzuela feel that the effects of the system on poor and minority youth are the most damaging because schools for such students are teaching to the test and, thus, weakening the curriculum and widening the gap between the White middle- and upper-class students and the low-income children from minority schools. There are several additional claims made by these authors:

1. The pressure to raise TAAS scores forces teachers to spend several hours a week in prep activities and on TAAS rather in rich curriculum activities. They cite a teacher: "Because we have to devote so much time to the specific functions of the TAAS test, it's harder and harder [to teach English]";
2. Drills can raise the reading scores on TAAS, but many students cannot use these skills for actual reading, make sense of text in literature or reading tasks outside of class, nor can they connect reading to other activities, such as discourse and writing. These children not only fail to learn the same rich, complex material that children in middle class schools learn, but they are simultaneously required to devote hours and hours each week to a de facto worthless curriculum;
3. It is a myth that TAAS sets the minimum standards and that teachers are encouraged to go beyond them. In many schools, it is the best-prepared teachers with the richest curriculum who are required to scale back in order to teach to the sequence and format of the TAAS;
4. Expenditures for TAAS are displacing instructional expenditures. It becomes impossible to disaggregate test-prep from "curricular" expenditures;
5. Those schools that score higher on TAAS (White, wealthier) rarely teach directly to the TAAS. "A tortured logic governs the highly prescriptive administration of the TAAS in predominantly minority schools: If the scores increase, it is because the school taught more to the test; however, if the scores decrease, the school needs to teach more to the test;" and

6. Teaching to the TAAS deprives students from receiving culturally relevant instruction. TAAS is particularly inappropriate for LEP students, given the scarcity of ESL courses in high school. The TAAS exit test is particularly detrimental to and traumatic for LEP students (see also Valenzuela, 1999).

These powerful statements by McNeil and Valenzuela are based on their own research, and some of this research is in progress. Therefore, some of the evidence backing up the more devastating and generalized claims needs to become available. In the meantime, a group of researchers, in an attempt to understand the dynamics of TAAS and the reality of testing in Texas, presented also powerful reasoning to view TAAS and equity commitments in a different light.

### **TAAS Can Lead to Equity and Pragmatic Solutions**

Linda Skrla and James Scheurich identified four school districts (Aldine, Brazosport, San Benito and Wichita Falls) that demonstrated significant improvements in TAAS and districts that had substantial numbers of children of color and/or children from low-income families. These four school districts, ranging in student population from 8,000 to 50,000, all had a large percentage of low-income students and/or a large percentage of African-American or Hispanic students.

The authors selected schools in which superintendents seem to have found ways to successfully displace deficit thinking. They acknowledge, however, that the deficit discourse on the educability of children of color and low-income children has been significantly displaced, but not totally eliminated (it is still in circulation). Accountability has been saluted by some as a miraculous cure for all, and it has been lambasted by others as a new type of discrimination. The effects are mixed; in some settings it has helped bring about equity and in others it has made no difference. In fact, “deficit thinking” about the educability of certain children (low-income, LEPs, ethnics) and about educators’ responsibilities for successfully educating them is widespread in most schools. A small group of superintendents have used successfully the accountability system to improve equity and effectiveness in teaching all children. But even these superintendents recognize that deficit thinking “has not entirely lost its grip.” There has been a “displacement” rather than an eradication of deficit thinking.

The chapter (11) by James Koschoreck provides additional data on Aldine ISD that seems to document in more detail the conditions under which accountability with TAAS can trigger genuine equity movements in education. In 1994, only 38.1% of African-American students and 47.1% of Hispanic students passed the math portion of the TAAS test in Aldine, in contrast with 73.3% of White students. In 1999, 72.8% of African Americans, 80.7% of Hispanics, and 91.9% of White students passed. Koschoreck feels that “Aldine opted to focus on how the state accountability system might be used to stimulate more positive student

outcomes.” The Texas state accountability system provided disaggregated achievement scores based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, thus giving the district personnel and teachers the opportunity to confront specific challenges and to endorse district-wide goals. The mechanism that facilitated the achievement of these goals was provided by the superintendent who established horizontal and vertical organizational teams to monitor progress and set in march an “incremental or evolutionary” approach to change in the district. Koschoreck shares the opinion of Aldine administrators that “public schools in the state of Texas have to have some measure of accountability” and that one has to have “some kind of goal to shoot for.” Rather than letting minorities stay in the lower achievement ranks, the new accountability system gives teachers and administrators the incentive to urge ALL students, “This is what the world is living. If you want to compete with these other folks, this is what you need to do.”

The explanation for the apparent success of Aldine given by Koschoreck is that the knowledge gained by administrators and teachers on the disaggregated data permitted them to advocate for the notion that all children can succeed and that the district is responsible for all. The superintendent announced: “I got tired of our name in the paper being at the bottom of the list. But what I got tired of hearing is that we were minority, that we were poor. That that’s the best we could do. And I said, ‘Well, enough is enough. We are going to change the way we’re doing business in Aldine.’” In brief, Koschoreck suggests that Aldine ISD has used TAAS with vision and pragmatism to raise students performance across racial and socioeconomic categories.

### **Lingering Questions, Doubts, and Concerns**

Polar positions are often equally biased. On the one hand, there is no way we can protect all children from harm in the schools, and, in some circumstances, testing can harm them by paving the way to tracking and further discrimination. On the other hand, the reality of testing in schools is undeniable. Yes, we can urge administrators to provide testing in the home languages during the period of transition from limited to fluent English-proficient student. But, in the end, moving up in academia, graduating, and getting a job are activities that become inherently risky and difficult for all students, especially immigrant, low-income, and minority students. The much heralded success of TAAS in some school districts is a political reality that has consequences for all. Survival of teachers, superintendents, and principals depends on such success. Is it possible that, in some instances, the pressure of TAAS has finally moved teachers and administrators to “discover” neglected kids? Yes. Is it possible that TAAS pressure would produce genuine effort to teach minority kids with the same dedication and interest as any other kids? The position defended by Koschoreck, Skrla, and Scheurich—that school personnel have, in specific districts, benefited from TAAS because TAAS data provided clear evidence of neglect and the

opportunity to generate realistic achievement goals and ever-increasing expectations with less political risk—is credible and indeed more constructive than the rejection of TAAS or the position that TAAS should not be used with specific kinds of children.

The exclusion of minority and low-income children from taking the TAAS would constitute a *de facto* classification that would be detrimental to many of them. The complex logistics of an attempt to exclude such students is in itself an impossibility. Does that mean that we can ignore the risks and problems alluded to by McNeil and Valenzuela? No. We must insist on a humane and less prescriptive use of TAAS, especially during transition stages of children whose lives are already very complicated by mobility, poverty, and neglect. But, in the end, if TAAS can be used to make principals, superintendents, and teachers responsible for the achievement of ALL children, and if the acceptance of this responsibility results in better teaching and more attention to those neglected children, then it seems that TAAS (within some common sensical conditions) should be as positive as Fuller and Johnson claim. It is too early to claim success or failure for a testing system that is relatively recent, and the need to gather additional evidence, to revise and improve the system continuously, is undeniable. Creating higher and new standards for all children is not necessarily a bad thing, if assistance and the investment of resources is adequate. Will equalization of budgetary resources follow equal treatment in testing? Perhaps, but now the teachers, principals, and superintendents are responsible for the success and failure of all children, not the children or their families as originally deficit thinking claimed!

At the risk of making politically incorrect statements, I think that some of the strongest positions against the TAAS are overly protective in orientation. On the other hand, some of the extremely supportive positions can be seen as politically opportunistic. This makes it difficult to comment on TAAS. I know I'm walking a fine line between these two extremes. My understanding of poor and ethnic children (immigrant in particular) is that academia (achievement in school and success in other public institutions) is not as important as daily survival. Furthermore, children in poverty and excluded ethnic groups are extremely resilient and capable of handling the toughest challenges. The last thing they need is overprotection. They need a fair treatment and some assistance to measure up to social expectations. In fact, these children have an untapped cultural capital that permits them to adapt to different cultural situations and to face with courage challenges that middle- and upper-class children may not be prepared to face.

Low-income and culturally different children develop coping mechanisms such as multiple identities and resiliency that provide them with functionally adaptive mechanisms that constitute a significant new cultural capital and an effective instrument of empowerment. From the first Marxist and cultural reproduction theorists (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowels & Gintis, 1976) to critical theorists dealing with the reproduction of social-class inequalities



perpetuated by schools through tracking, poor quality instruction, and teacher prejudice (Anyon, 1981, 1997; Apple 1982; Oakes, 1985; Willis 1981), there have been a number of reactions on the part of ethnic researchers (who experienced first hand poverty and segregation) to the issues of oppression and underachievement. Their voices must be heard because their message is important (Foley 1999, Trueba 1999a).

Deprivation or lack of cultural capital is often associated with extended oppression, exploitation, and lack of education. However, education that domesticates an ethnic group can also become oppressive. Poor and ethnic children can learn to handle educational institutions and decide for themselves to what extent they want to use them in their survival strategies. The issue is that they must be free to make some important decisions as to whether to belong or not in schools, and whether or not they want to achieve academically or not.

Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990, 1993; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) developed the concepts of *habitus* and field. He wanted to generate a concept of an agent free from both deterministic and mechanistic causality. Habitus was an alternative to “subjectivism” with its load of consciousness and was a reaction against structuralism, understood as an unconscious adherence to prescribed behavior. In public schools we have become used to seeing poor and ethnic children with compassion and used to neglecting them via our deficit mentality. We have now opened the door to discuss concepts of agency and consciousness that enhance the empowerment of low-income and ethnic children. Habitus (as defined by Bourdieu) is seen as a system of “durable, transposable dispositions or principles to generate or organize behavior.” TAAS, for example, may well have become a factor in awakening our consciousness to rediscover our social responsibilities and to develop a genuine respect for the poor and culturally different student populations. Because agents do not act in a vacuum but in specific contexts, Bourdieu conceived the notion of “field” (*champ*) as concrete social situations and a set of objective relations (thus avoiding a deterministic analysis of behavior). Social formations are structured by a hierarchically organized series of fields—economic, political, educational, and cultural. Agents determine field structures, and a change in agents brings a new field organization. In the case of Texas, the state testing system has created a new group of agents and new set of expected behavioral practices, along with a new set of rewards. This is a new cultural capital; Bourdieu’s notion of new cultural capital as “*connaissance*” and “*reconnaissance*” (knowledge and recognition) may now be granted not only to the new agents of TAAS, but to the children who use well the state system.

While Bourdieu’s perspective may help us conceptualize some of the drastic changes occurring in the politics of testing, we are still confronted with the challenge of working effectively in schools with students who have unique needs and belong to culturally different groups. Here once more, we cannot afford to overprotect these children whose resiliency has been tested in tough real-life situations (above and beyond the “risks” of academia). One can argue that

teaching to the test (as argued by those against TAAS) is the least productive approach to genuine teaching of anybody, but especially of children who have been neglected by the schools. There are other approaches that promise better results. For example, if we take a Vygotskian pedagogical perspective (see Moll, 1990; Trueba 1999; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978), then it is essential that we permit children to become active engineers of their own learning and play a key role in determining the next intellectual challenge in their development. This pedagogy does not occur in a classroom where hegemonic discourse silences culturally and linguistically diverse children or forces them into meaningless drills. But in a profoundly genuine sense, social and intellectual life are an *assisted performance* in one way or another, especially for children as they become acquainted with complex symbolic systems that form constellations of cognitive domains. A Vygotskian pedagogy of hope is just the opposite of educational neglect, and it is equally opposed to a kind of protectionism of the presumed “victims.” The possession of several identities for an immigrant person is not just a way to adapt and survive, but an asset, a new cultural capital that enhances the child’s capacity to succeed in our modern global society. It is, to use Bourdieu’s terms, a new “cultural capital.”

Leaving theoretical considerations on the side, I have some important concerns with the practice of TAAS. Perhaps in a more practical vein, if the TAAS is to succeed, first, the state should organize mechanisms to review classifications, scores, and decisions based on the results of the TAAS. Second, the state should encourage research projects aiming at assessing the impact of TAAS and the improvements needed in order to prevent the abuses and harmful effects alleged by opponents of the test. These projects should be longitudinal, methodologically sound, and organized in ways acceptable to all parties involved. Third, while the TAAS is hopefully displacing deficit thinking among school administrators and teachers, there is only one convincing argument to abandon such mentality: the actual experience of success with poor and ethnic children; in fact, they themselves will never believe they can succeed in academia unless they experience success. By the same token, poor and ethnic children and their families must also recognize that academic failure (as oppression and other social evils) is co-constructed by the system (its institutions, accountability systems, etc.) and the individuals themselves who fail. It is not enough to declare foul and go. What are the options we have? What is the best course of action? What kind of training should be given to teachers, principals, and superintendents? What changes are needed in the TAAS in order for it to be fair and serve its purpose?

## References

Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry* 11(1): 3–42.

- . (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Apple, M. (1982). *Cultural and economic reproduction in American education: Essays in class, ideology and the state*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . (1990). *The logic of practice* (R.Nice, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on art and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J-C. (1977). *Reproduction: in education, society and culture*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Foley, D. (1999). *Reconceptualizing ethnicity and school achievement: The rise of ethnic ethnographers*. Unpublished manuscript, the University of Texas at Austin.
- McNeil, L.M. (2000). *Contradictions of reform: The educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- McNeil, L.M., & Valenzuela, A. (2001). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In G.Orfield and M.L.Kornhaber (Eds.). *Raising standards or raising barriers: Inequality and high-stakes testing in public education* (127–50). New York: The Century Foundation.
- Moll, L. (1990). Introduction. In L.Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology* (pp. 1–27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Trueba, H.T. (1999a). *Latinos unidos: From cultural diversity to the politics of solidarity*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- . (1999b). Critical ethnography and a Vygotskian pedagogy of hope: The empowerment of Mexican immigrant children. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 12(6), 591–614.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- . (1978). Interaction between learning and development. In L.Vygotsky, *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (pp. 79–91). M.Cole, V.John-Teiner, S.Scribner, & E.Souberman (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Willis, P. (1981). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

## **PART IV**

# **Critiques and Commentaries on the Equity-Accountability Debate**



# CHAPTER 16

## **Educational Accountability for English Language Learners in Texas**

### *A Retreat from Equity*

WILLIAM R. BLACK AND ANGELA VALENZUELA

#### **Introduction**

Educational accountability systems in the United States that employ standardized testing practices can be traced back through various historical efforts to centralize and professionalize educational institutions that often dealt with immigrant students and families. This includes the use of IQ testing to support more centralized, comprehensive high schools in the progressive era and early efforts at professionalization and centralization during the common school movement (Fass, 1980; Spring, 2001; Tyack, 1974). Notwithstanding this long, complex, and disputed history, recent policy discourse around accountability systems has paid much less attention to these systems' impact on, and design for, English language learners (ELLs), more commonly referred to as limited English proficient (LEP) students, many of whom are immigrants. In Texas, for example, despite a decade long system of accountability, in 2001, only an estimated 20% of ELL 10th graders met minimum standards on all three high-school exit level tests (Ruiz de Velasco, forthcoming).

After listing demographic and socioeconomic factors pertinent to ELLs, we draw primarily from documentary data provided by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to trace the process by which LEP students have been incorporated—through testing—into the Texas Accountability System. We focus primarily on state-level inclusion decisions that lead to the following outcomes: first, a narrowing of the official definition of a LEP student for testing purposes; second, the non-inclusion of Spanish-language testing of immigrant students at the 7th- and 8th-grade levels; and third, the development of the Reading Proficiency Test in English (RPTE). With respect to each of these steps, we present institutional and professional advocacy perspectives and follow with our own critical analysis.

The decision-making narrative that unfolds unearths a new conceptualization of equity for language minority youth. That is, rather than an additive, culture-affirming vision of educational accountability that is to be found in the voluminous scholarship on bilingual education and culturally relevant pedagogy

(Cummins & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998; García, 1994, 2001; Krashen, 1981; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thomas & Collier, 1996; Trueba & Bartolomé, 2000; Trujillo, 1998; Vásquez, 2003), equity for ELL and immigrant youth gets couched *within* the larger, more public, and hegemonic discourse of educational accountability. Rather than responding directly to the assets and needs of a growing and relatively poorer population of immigrant and English Language Learners (González, 2002), *equal access to mandated testing* is the new discourse for equity. Our exploration further exposes archaeological layers of deficit and subtractive assimilationist discourse that informs the narrow construction of policies that are more performative than substantive and potentially compromise the goal of a prosperous educational experience for language minority youth (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999).

### **Demographic and Socioeconomic Trends**

Within the contemporary era of accountability, ELLs and immigrant students are often posited as important, and increasingly complex “challenges” to contemporary educational efforts in the United States. The following data highlight a few national-level demographic and socioeconomic trends for ELL and immigrant students, particularly Latino and Mexican immigrants.

- The amount of school-age children with at least one immigrant parent trebled from 1970 to 1997 to 20%. (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2002, p. 1) In 1999, 66.5% of the Mexican-origin population was either a first- or second-generation immigrant. (González, 2002, p. 7)
- Latinos make up 56% of immigrant children, but they are 75% of all LEP students. (Ruiz de Velasco, forthcoming)
- Legal immigration in the United States has risen from 4.5 million (1971–1980) to 7.3 million (1981–1990) and then to 9.1 million (1991–2000). (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002)
- From 1970 until 1997, the immigrant poverty rate increased from 17 to 44%. (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2002, p. 23)
- Between 1970 and 1995, 60 percent of the 5.7% rise in the U.S. child poverty rate is associated with immigrant children. (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2002, p. 2)
- Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American average age (26 years) is much younger than that of non-Mexican-Americans and corresponds to ages in which families are having children that will be attending public schools. Whereas the average non-Mexican family contains three persons, the average Mexican origin family contains four. (González, 2002, pp. 7, 10)
- It is estimated that 20% of all ELL students at the high school and 12% at the middle school levels have missed two or more years of schooling since age six. These students have difficulty working at age-appropriate levels in required subjects and have little time to prepare for exit-level examinations.

Additionally, secondary-school ESL programs are designed with the assumption of a modicum of literacy in the native language. (Ruiz de Velasco, forthcoming)

- With increasing segregation in schools (Orfield & Yun, 1999), ELL and immigrant youth have been particularly concentrated in particular schools. Almost two-thirds of all students in the United States attend schools with less than 1% LEP enrollment, whereas about half of all LEP students attend schools where 30% or more of their fellow students are LEP. (Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2002, 3)

Within Texas, educational institutions' struggles with the challenges and opportunities in educating Latino and immigrant youth are both new and historic (San Miguel, 1987). Latino students now outnumber Anglo students (41.7% to 40.9%) in Texas public schools. Yet, 72.5% of Texas teachers are White (TEA, 2002c). Texas is second only to California in the number of LEP students enrolled and more than 90% of the LEP students enrolled speak Spanish as their primary language (TEA, 2000, p. 6). In the 2001–2002 school year, bilingual/ESL program enrollment was 13.1% of total school enrollment and bilingual/ESL-designated teachers accounted for 7.5% of the teaching population in Texas. The budgeted instructional operating expenditures linked to bilingual/ESL programs were 4.3% of total operating expenditures. From 1997 to 2001, the percentage of LEP-identified students in Texas public schools rose from 13.4% of the total student population to 14.5%, a gain of over 100,000 students (TEA, 2002b; TEA, 2002c). In terms of bilingual education program participation, there are dramatic declines after 3rd and 5th grade, while ESL program support peaks in 6th and 10th grades (TEA, 2000, p. 6). The graduation completion rate for 2001 was officially only 73% for Latino students (TEA, 2002c). Consequently, assessing the Texas Accountability System's impact on Latino, ELL, and immigrant youth is a particularly pressing issue with national implications as many of the provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* replicate the Texas accountability effort at the national level, where demographic trends of immigrant and minority student populations are following the patterns already witnessed in Texas.

### **Designs for Inclusion of ELL and Immigrant Youth in the Texas Accountability System**

Although Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)<sup>1</sup> testing has been a part of most Texas schoolchildren's lives since the early 1990s, large portions of the growing, predominantly Spanish speaking population of LEP youth were exempted from such testing. Exemption of large percentages of LEP youth, particularly in a few large urban districts, sparked significant institutional and public concern for system gaming, data distortion, and the loss of equity and performance effects for LEP youth and the schools that educated them (TEA,



2000, 2002a; Valenzuela, 2000). Actions that emerged demonstrate an accountability system-sustaining incrementalism, (Lindblom, 1950) played out by agentic institutional actors (Scott & Christensen, cited in Rorrer, 2002) that designed instruments and techniques to include ELL and immigrant youth more cohesively within the Texas Accountability System.

The first step toward LEP inclusion through testing regards the Spanish transadapted<sup>2</sup> TAAS. It was officially introduced in Grades 3–6 in 1997 in order to increase the participation of LEP students in the accountability system. Prior to 1997, many LEP students (immigrant and non-immigrant alike) were typically exempted from all high-stakes testing for up to three years. In the Spring-1999 legislative session, State Representative Domingo García attached an amendment to Senate Bill (SB) 103 that limited LEP exemptions to only one year and narrowed the availability of these exemptions to “recent, unschooled” immigrants. This definition applied only to recent immigrants who had experienced limited educational opportunities in their home countries (Valenzuela & Maxcy, forthcoming). This amendment was part of a larger bill aimed at raising expectations for all students by promoting a higher-level test and a more expansive assessment system. It created the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) to replace the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in the 2002–2003 school year. Consequently, for the 1999–2000 school year, the state board of education also limited the number of exemptions to this category of recent, unschooled immigrants.<sup>3</sup> However, feeling pressure primarily from predominantly Mexican-origin South Texas school districts, the state board postponed for one year (until the 2000–2001 school session), the one-year maximum for exemptions. Then in April 2001, Senate Bill 676 passed, only a few weeks before the TAAS was administered. This action reversed the policy, returning to the traditional 3-year window for exemptions, albeit retaining the narrower exemption category of recent, unschooled immigrants. As a result of these changes in LEP exemption eligibility, the statewide LEP exemption rate dropped from 20% (1998–1999) to 10.7% (1999–2000), and then to 1.4% (2001–2002) (TEA, 2002a, p. 6; TEA, 2002c).

The exemption eligibility changes were linked to the development and implementation of an instrument that incorporated LEP-exempt students into the accountability system: the Reading Proficiency Test in English (RPTE), which also aimed to help districts guide students *toward* participation on the English Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), which for the 2002–2003 school year evolved into the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). The RPTE publicly tracks annual yearly progress toward the acquisition of English reading proficiency (TEA, 2002d, p. 6). It is adapted from the reading portion of the English TAAS. These inclusionary modifications to the system were part of an official institutional effort to ensure an assessment of LEP students that was reliable and equitable and that would prove to be “useful tools for improving both student learning and the overall effectiveness of Texas schools” (TEA, 2000, p. 1).

### **Congruence with Federal Policy**

Inclusionary efforts in Texas came on the heels of the 1994 reauthorization of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which required states to implement comprehensive accountability systems for schools receiving Title I funds. Additionally, in 1994, Goals 2000 provided some funding to states to create their own assessment system. Most states then developed more comprehensive accountability systems aimed at including all students (Ravitch, 2002, p. 2). Currently, states distributing Title I funds to school districts must set up yearly goals that measure and categorize as adequate the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for academic achievement of all students, including ELLs. Beginning in 2002–2003, states must report AYP on English proficiency as a requirement for receiving Title I funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As many LEP and immigrant youth attend Title I schools, efforts were thus undertaken around the country to develop accountability measures for LEP youth. These new federal requirements contain elements of the new discourse of equity through testing as they were “a response to concerns among some civil rights advocates that schools serving large numbers of poor, minority, and LEP students set lower standards for their education” (Ruiz de Velasco, forthcoming).

The *NCLB* has many provisions that mirror accountability provisions already in place in Texas, including mandatory annual testing of all students in Grades 3–8 and performance accountability measures for schools and districts, including a measurement of progress in the acquisition of English language proficiency for LEP youth (Ruiz de Velasco, forthcoming). Through Title III, *NCLB* targets immigrant youth for inclusion in English language tests and provides slightly expanded resources for professional development, teacher training, and evidence-based research on effective programs for ELLs. The Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) has been restructured and retitled the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students, or OLEA. In keeping with the *NCLB*'s preference for block grants, the previous categorical federal funds that went directly to school districts are now distributed through state offices. OELA described the purpose of tying accountability measures to Title III funds, which is:

to ensure that limited English proficient (LEP) students, including immigrant children and youth, develop English proficiency and meet the same academic content and academic achievement standards that other children are expected to meet. Schools use these funds [from block grants] to implement language instruction educational programs designed to help LEP students achieve these standards. State educational agencies (SEAs), local educational agencies (LEAs), and schools are accountable for increasing the English proficiency and core academic content knowledge of LEP students. (U.S. Department of Education, 2002)

### **Policy Discourses on Equity**

During the 1999 session, the Texas legislature commissioned a study of the following: (1) a possible expansion of the assessment system for LEP students to include Spanish assessment in Grades 7 and 8; (2) a reconsideration of the recently passed one-year LEP exemption and options for re-establishing the 3-year exemption; and (3) a consideration of the “use of performance on the RPTE as a vehicle for measuring TAAS readiness” (TEA, 2000, p. 1). Motivating this study were concerns in the legislature “about the number of students exempted from the assessment system and the need to lower this number to better promote the academic achievement of all students” (TEA, 2000, p. 1). This study, authored by an outside consulting group called BETA and published by TEA in December of 2000, was entitled *Study of Possible Expansion of the Assessment System for Limited English Proficient Students*. This report followed the passage of the abovementioned SB 103 in the 1999 session. Two of the three recommendations in the BETA report were endorsed by then Texas education commissioner, Jim Nelson, and subsequently were contained in Senate Bill 676, which passed in April, 2001. SB 676 allowed for an up to three-year testing exemption for “recent, unschooled immigrants.” Implicitly, it recommended *not* expanding Spanish TAAS to the 7th- and 8th-grade levels. Additionally, and congruent with the federal NCLB legislation that calls for annual testing of ELLs in English, it supported the development and continued implementation of the RPTE, employed continually in Texas since 2000.

Another key document explaining the development, use, and interpretation of the RPTE is the primary training guide for campus level Language Proficiency Assessment Committees (LPACs). The charge of the LPAC is to guide and document assessment and placement decisions for LEP students. Members include an administrator, two teachers of LEP students, and a parent of a LEP child. This document explains for LPAC members why the RPTE was developed and guides them in using and interpreting RPTE data productively. In Texas, LPACs are responsible for guiding and documenting assessment and placement decisions for LEP students (TEA, 2002a).

### **The Spanish Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)**

The Spanish TAAS is designed to hold schools accountable for imparting content knowledge while transitioning students into the all-English curriculum and thus to assessment with English-language assessment instruments. Spanish TAAS performance is fully included in the high-stakes accountability rating system at the school and district levels. In the academic year the Spanish TAAS was introduced, statewide LEP exemption rates decreased from 30% in 1996 to 20% in 1997. Reflecting the use of assessment for the transitional purpose of moving students out of bilingual programs and congruent with the grade-level distribution of bilingual education program support, Spanish TAAS participation

rates of LEP students in 2000 was 32.3% for 3rd grade, 24.8% for 4th grade, 14.0% for 5th grade, and 3.8% for 6th grade (TEA, 2000, p. 9). During this transition process, students may take one section (for example, Math) in English and another in Spanish.

### *Institutional Discourse*

Reflected within the BETA report was an expressed interest among some members of the legislature and TEA in considering the expansion of the Spanish TAAS in order to increase LEP student participation in highstakes testing. TEA originally introduced the Spanish TAAS in grades 3–6 to “expand the inclusion of LEP students in statewide assessments” (TEA, 2000, p. 6). This position is supported by the fact that at grade levels where the Spanish TAAS becomes unavailable to students, statewide exemption rates have typically risen. In 2000, LEP exemption rates were disproportional across grade levels, ranging from around 10% in grades 3–6 to approximately 20% in 7th and 8th grades (TEA, 2000, p. 9). Therefore, expanding the Spanish TAAS to 7th and 8th grades might reduce the LEP exemption rates, as occurred in 1997, when Spanish testing was introduced for 3–6th grade students.

However, projections of numbers of potential 7th- and 8th-grade TAAS participants indicated that expanding the reach of Spanish TAAS options might not be a cost-effective alternative (TEA, 2000, pp. 24–26). This is further complicated by trends in performance gaps for students in transitional bilingual programs, who tend to receive less native language instruction and more English or ESL instruction in higher grade levels. Additionally, many of those taking the 6th grade Spanish TAAS may be recent immigrants, while a significant number of those taking the thirdgrade test may have been in Texas schools for several years. In 2002, the gap between English and Spanish TAAS State wide passage rates (for all tests taken in 3rd through 6th grade) *increased* through each grade level, from a low of 9% in 3rd grade to a high of 27% in 6th grade (TEA, 2002b). The BETA report also positioned this performance gap between English and Spanish TAAS performance through a discourse of opportunity to learn:

Assessment in the first language when instruction is delivered in the second language may result in inaccurate measurement of students’ knowledge and skills. The concept of fairness requires that all examinees must be given comparable opportunities to demonstrate their standing on the constructs being assessed. (TEA, 2000, p. 13)

### *Advocate Discourse*

In general, support for the inclusion of the 7th- and 8th-grade Spanish TAAS broke down geographically, with advocates from areas with a high influx of Spanish-speaking students most in favor of expanding the availability of the

Spanish TAAS. Supporters justified the use of the Spanish TAAS for two main reasons. First, 7th- and 8th-grade assessments inspire an appropriate use of Spanish and the development of dual-language programs at the middle school level, and could even support bilingual K-16 education. However, the relative invisibility of these types of programs made it difficult to argue for change in this direction. Second, the use of Spanish-language assessment supports later-exit bilingual programs at the elementary level, and it would certainly be a better assessment for those that very recently entered the school (TEA, 2000, pp. 14–15, 24–26).

Arguments against the Spanish TAAS for 7th and 8th grade consisted of the following: the top reason given was that it would produce meaningless or mismeasured results. It would be unfair to hold schools accountable for results in a language that was not used for instruction. A Spanish test was not congruent with English, the language of instruction for LEP immigrant students in the 7th- and 8th-grade ESL, or with immersion environments. Also, the opinion was expressed that the use of Spanish TAAS at the middle-school level might prevent students from receiving the intense instruction they needed in English to succeed in high school, where they would eventually have to pass an exit test in English. This is similar to the argument frequently employed at the elementary-school level where educators and parents speak of the need to eliminate Spanish instruction and Spanish testing so as to prepare students for an environment where all instruction and assessment will be in English. In interviews with some stakeholders, “it was thought that Spanish TAAS in Grades 7 and 8 might discourage...the use of resources in place at the elementary grades to bring students to an adequate level of proficiency in English by the time they are in middle school” (TEA, 2000, p. 22).

### *Analysis*

In the positions presented in the December 2000 TEA report, it was difficult to encounter discussions about developing policies focused on developing bilingualism or biculturalism as either a public or private asset including their potentially significant contribution to academic achievement. Moreover, underlying much of the critique of the expansion is an axiological orientation that distrusts educators’ abilities to develop students’ proficiencies in English in the context of bilingual or Spanish-language content instruction and assessment. As McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) argue, this distrust of educators is a much greater problem underlying all accountability schemes.

In addition, the logic used in calculating the cost of developing the Spanish TAAS tests for the 7th and 8th grade was skewed towards an undercount of potential Spanish TAAS examinees. The report’s projections were based on 6th-grade participation on the Spanish TAAS, which hovers around 3.5% of total test takers (TEA, 2000, pp. 24–26). However, this figure is low since LEP students coming from elementary schools have already used their 3 years of exemption by

6th grade, and most students are instructed in ESL programs in 7th and 8th grade. In contrast, a more pedagogically and learner-centered argument allows for assessment choices to follow from the linguistic and social needs of students and therefore obligates a more expansive view of the Spanish TAAS. This makes Spanish TAAS participation rates at earlier grade levels a more valid base for calculation of potential Spanish TAAS at 7th, 8th, or higher grade levels.

However, the scarcity of resources in a high-stakes environment led to rational-choice deliberations that argued against the Spanish TAAS at Grades 7 and 8. Instead, transitional resources (i.e., Spanish TAAS and instruction) should be concentrated at the elementary level, releasing middle schools from the obligation of bilingual instruction and assessment (TEA, 2000, p. 22).

### **The Reading Proficiency Test in English (RPTE)**

The RPTE is constructed around the Texas state-reading objectives, and items are developed to target three broad developmental categories of English reading proficiency: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. Accordingly, students receive categorical performance ratings in one of those three categories. All immigrant and LEP-identified children in Texas public schools take the RPTE in grades 3–12 until they reach the “advanced” performance level, at which point they no longer take the test. The test data captures students previously exempt from accountability and provides a statewide standardized measure of districts’, schools’, and students’ yearly progress towards English reading proficiency and then, ideally, a successful performance on English TAAS. Data are presented at the individual level and in the form of cohorts, specifically, the percentage of students in a grade-level cohort making annual progress from one performance category to the next. Although the information is reported publicly, no direct high-stakes sanctions have yet to be attached to poor performance or progress on this test (TEA, 2000, pp. 6–8).

#### *Institutional Discourse*

TEA states that

RPTE scores indicate how much English a Spanish TAAS examinee is able to read and understand, which helps the bilingual education teacher increase academic instruction in English. RPTE scores also help the LPAC ensure that the student will be able to demonstrate his or her academic skill levels meaningfully in English when TAAS in English is administered. (TEA, 2002a, p. 60)

In theory, the inclusion of the RPTE has made the assessment system more comprehensive and developmentally appropriate for ELLs while simultaneously leading them in a sequential manner to successful performance on the English

TAAS. “The RPTE and the TAAS reading tests form a sequential and cohesive system of measurement” (TEA, 2000, p. 28).

The BETA report lauded the benefits of the RPTE to assess academic reading ability in English and measure the essential knowledge and skills students needed to acquire in the interim period before the students take the TAAS in English. “This test will help districts ensure that LEP students are making the steady annual progress in reading that is a prerequisite to their success in English academic settings” (TEA, 2000, p. 26). The manual that the Texas Education Agency uses for training LPAC committee members (TEA, 2002a) clearly states that the primary purpose of the manual is “to guide LPACs about the inclusion of LEP students in the Texas Assessment Program” (p. 5). Its secondary purpose is to “raise the level of awareness of the educational needs of second language learners” (p. 5). The same manual also proposes that the levels of proficiency reported on the RPTE will help district management with their concerns about LEP student performance.

The RPTE thus functions as an integrator of the exempted student as they make progress toward full and successful inclusion in the system. The RPTE is a policy-derived instrument that is designed to serve an evaluative function in measuring an individual’s progress in learning English reading skills that are later tested in a high-stakes context. It further measures a school’s efficacy in both teaching English reading skills quickly and providing diagnostic information that will guide instruction both within as well as outside of the context of bilingual education programs. The transition to English instruction will be better managed and inaccurate decisions about when to test students will be minimized. To wit, TEA’s manual for LPACs functions to

help LPACs include LEP students in the assessment system in a consistent and appropriate manner. Both administering state assessments to a LEP student too soon and delaying the assessments too long can have undesirable consequences. Measuring LEP students’ academic skills in English before they have had time to learn English confounds assessment data.... On the other hand, delaying the testing of struggling LEP students until they no longer struggle distorts information about how well schools are meeting their educational needs. (TEA, 2002a, p. 8)

If schools and districts wait too long to test, “their [students’] special needs will not be identified and addressed promptly, they may struggle academically long after they have learned the English language” (TEA, 2002c, p. 9).

There are, though, recognitions of the imperfections of the instrument in leveraging change. TEA itself publicized the issue that 51% of RPTE test takers enrolled in school for 4 or more years (59,000 students) did not reach the advanced level in 2001. A response to this is to state that:

when adequate teaching and learning have occurred a LEP student should be able to reach advanced level on RPTE before taking TAAS... A student who scores at the beginning or intermediate level on the RPTE one year and stays at the same level the next year is not progressing at a rate of one level per year. Careful local diagnosis and instructional planning are needed for such students, as they may have difficulty succeeding academically and attaining advanced proficiency by the time TAAS is required. (TEA, 2000, p. 57)

### *Advocate Discourse*

Many respondents in the 2000 TEA study indicated that they were receptive to the use of the RPTE because they were already being held accountable for English TAAS performance, yet they had no systematic means of assessing their immigrant and LEP students that was directly linked to the TAAS. Some stakeholders stated that the RPTE was a critical component that could support the “use of the resources in place at the elementary grades to bring students to an adequate level of proficiency in English by the time they are in Middle School” (TEA, 2000, p. 22).

Several school district bilingual directors met at the October 2000 Texas Association for Bilingual Education Conference. They spoke in the role of advocates for immigrants and LEP youth and also as the school personnel who work with them: “This group strongly supports accountability and maintains that *LEP students should have equal access to mandated testing*, when appropriate, in order to make sure that school districts are accountable for the achievement of these students” (TEA, 2000, p. 57). Focus group interviews conducted by BETA with advocates and experts reflected strong support for limiting LEP exemptions, and these interviews indicated that the RPTE was viewed as a way to limit those exemptions, while providing some time for the students to catch up (TEA, 2000, p. 21).

Many of the advocates that did indicate support for the RPTE also urged caution in designing its use. In general, they were in favor of using it for reporting and instructional purposes, but not as a high-stakes accountability measure. This concern was also extended to time needed for transition to successful performance on the TAAS. The survey of parents, students, and other community members carried out as part of the 2000 TEA-sponsored report indicates that most respondents suggested that it takes 3–6 years for a LEP student “to demonstrate academic progress meaningfully on a standardized test like TAAS” (TEA, 2000, p. 18).

### *Analysis*

The RPTE is an ambivalent instrument. Not unlike the many immigrant students that feel in-between worlds (Olsen, 1997), or perhaps reflective of the



educational systems' historic ambivalence toward Mexican immigrants (Gonzalez, 1997), the instrument is not fully high stakes, but certainly public enough to reify assimilationist notions that English proficiency is the only type of linguistic proficiency that is important. The nature of the instrument also suggests that the acquisition of English-language proficiency supersedes content knowledge acquisition in the native language. The RPTE was introduced in 2000, 7 years into the Texas high-stakes accountability policy effort. Although reported publicly as the percentage of students in particular campuses or districts that annually move from one performance category to another, poor performance on this particular exam currently does not carry direct punitive state intervention. There is, however, the stated possibility that in the future schools with large percentages of students that perform poorly will have to provide instructional assistance plans for accelerating English-language acquisition (TEA, 2002a, p. 65). As a practitioner managing the use of the instrument, one of us, Bill Black, was always unclear as to its potential use.

One equity argument put forth posits that previously hidden inequalities are exposed through the public nature of the accountability system, and this exposure has the possibility of changing behaviors so that all children are served<sup>4</sup> (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000). The RPTE does bluntly expose differences in English language acquisition, and almost no one disputes the importance of English language reading proficiency in the United States, immigrants most of all. Nevertheless, the insistence on one indicator that focuses on rapid English acquisition, and displays the rate of acquisition publicly, focuses attention on deficit notions of what the students do not have, which in this case is English proficiency. These language deficit notions are further reified by the construction of a policy environment in which there is no other similar asset-based or compensatory indicator that shares public view. Even though rising levels of literacy in the native language translate to success in the second language (Cummins, 1998; Thomas & Collier, 1996), no such knowledge or asset is publicly displayed and, by its exclusion, is subtly guided back to the private spaces of the home.

There is no parallel reading-proficiency test in Spanish. The irony here is that the expansive research base on the benefits of later exit- or dual-language bilingual education in not only promoting academic achievement but also reducing the achievement gap, is handily swept aside under this mandate for inclusion (Crawford, 2000; Cummins & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998; García, 1994; Krashen, 1981; Vásquez, 2003). What is striking throughout the BETA report, which included surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with many bilingual-education advocates, is that it was difficult to encounter discourse around developing bilingualism or biculturalism as a public asset, except in the limited context of considering the development of 7th- and 8th-grade Spanish TAAS tests as a means of supporting bilingual education at the middle school (TEA, 2000, p. 21). Despite the economic, social, and cultural capital benefits inherent in developing and supporting multicultural and multilingual students, an

opposite technology of high-stakes subtraction is being applied in a myriad of small ways through the public legitimation of English first approaches. The current approach applies new technologies of assessment and reporting that provide disciplinary ammunition for assimilationist discourses and subtractive notions of immigrant schooling which have always been embedded within transitional bilingual education policy. Freeman argues that an assimilationist discourse has been dominant among policy-makers since the inception of bilingual education programs in the 1960s, as even the initial passage of Title VII crafted bilingual education as compensatory and as a means to eliminate students' language handicap (1998, pp. 41, 66–67). The RPTE aligns with critical shortages of bilingual teachers, fewer materials in Spanish, and, in some cases, administrators who do not believe in bilingual education to create a new focus on deficits precisely at a time when immigrant and ELL youth are becoming prominent in our schools.

There is potentially a more generalized discursive effect of the exclusive public reporting of students' test scores in English. For instance, school personnel are much more likely to start speaking about rapid English transition and policing the over-extension of instruction in Spanish or another native language despite the availability of Spanish TAAS through Grade 6. Most insidiously, the RPTE does not focus on attainment of proficiency levels comparable to native speakers, but rather aims to help determine or delineate a point at which "typical" LEP students can take the assessment in English as "an appropriate educational activity" (TEA, 2000, p. 12). In essence, this is a blunt, bureaucratic solution that in effect ascribes a low standard to both native-language and English-language development for the child.

Data are emerging which suggest a correlation with Sabatier and Mazmanian's (1995) dictum that the more diverse the behavior being regulated, the less likely that the objectives of the policy will be successful. This becomes compounded when reforms contain implicit causal theories that are inadequate. The policy assumes that in monitoring and diagnosing LEP students with the RPTE, schools will make efforts that will produce both second language and academic content knowledge for all LEP and immigrant students. Such putative outcomes will, in turn, lead to success on high-stakes tests. This implicit linear assumption that students will be guided through the RPTE performance categories is currently not supported by TEA's emerging data, nor by ample evidence that shows a focus on content knowledge in the first language propels second language acquisition (Brisk, 1998; Cummins & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1998; Freeman, 1998; García, 1994; Krashen, 1981).

Assumptions about the ability for virtually all immigrant and LEP students to adapt quickly are set forth in the goals that TEA has for instructing LEP students. (Note that the discourse focuses the responsibility for performance on the student):

Most immigrant LEP students in Spanish bilingual programs will be able to meet the requirements of the TEKS in Spanish by the spring of their first year in the U.S. [and] most immigrant LEP students who enter U.S. schools with little or no knowledge of English or with limited prior schooling will be able to meet the requirements of the TEKS by the end of their third year in the U.S. (TEA, 2002c, p.8)

In this idealized social policy, the relationship between increasing levels of performance on the RPTE, acquisition of English, and performance on TAAS should be fairly linear and rapid. State-level data should clearly smooth out variations and might demonstrate a simple, linear pattern. However, several interesting and contradictory data points emerge, partially explained by the indiscriminating (overly large) categories used in reporting RPTE results (TEA, 2002a, 58–60, 62–64).

- Overall, 41% of students who tested in 2000 and 2001 did not increase their rating by at least one proficiency level.
- At the lower-testing levels, there was little movement: Forty-five percent of the students rated “beginning” in spring 2000, were still rated beginning in spring 2002. Children who had been enrolled in U.S. schools for 4 or more years did not do any better than their less-experienced peers: Forty-five percent of those students who failed to move out of the beginning level had been in U.S schools for 4 years.
- Thirty-six percent moved from “beginning” to “intermediate” levels from 2000 to 2001.
- At the “intermediate” level, one third of the students did not change their proficiency level: Thirty-four percent rated “intermediate” in 2000 remained “intermediate” in 2001.
- There was more movement of higher rated students: Sixty-two percent of students who tested “intermediate” in 2000 received an “advanced” proficiency rating in 2001.
- At the aggregated state level, the percentage of students that moved upward in proficiency levels on the RPTE from 2000 and 2001 was lower for the cohort with four years or more of schooling in the United States than for the 2-year residency cohort and the 3-year residency cohort.
- In the spring of 2001, 15% of students in the 6th grade and 16% of students in the 10th grade (exit level) took the RPTE and scored in the “beginning” proficiency level on the RPTE and yet took the TAAS in English. At the lower end, 5% of 5th graders shared that performance combination. Secondary schools, with ESL or immersion approaches, appear to struggle disproportionately with these issues.
- In the spring of 2001, aggregate figures for the all grades tested on TAAS show that 12% of the students who scored “beginning” on the RPTE passed the English TAAS, whereas 30.9% of students who scored “intermediate” on

the RPTE passed the English TAAS. For those who scored advanced, 73.9% passed the English TAAS.

These results question the inferred predictive validity of the test for beginning- and intermediate-level performers and demonstrates a crisis in which many of the beginning and intermediate students will be forced to take the English TAAS with limited English proficiency.

### Conclusion

We conclude by considering the ways in which current policy directives vis-à-vis LEP, immigrant youth are embedded within a larger subtractive framework. The manner in which an instrument like the RPTE is designed and implemented creates subtle, normalizing incentives for assimilationist efforts that focus on what students lack rather than on what they possess. The RPTE certainly does not play a totalizing role, but rather works at cross-purposes with asset-based orientations more common in late-exit and dual-language models. A policy has been crafted that defines English Language Learners as a problem to the degree that they fall short of non-research based and arbitrary targeted goals. As knowledge claims about LEP children are mediated through accountability and performance indicators, knowledge claims about these students draw from subtractive and deficit notions embedded with multiple layers of assimilationist discursive formations. These discursive formations are drawn from an assimilationist policy archaeology, a set of social regularities that establish a set of conditions for a policy practice to be exercised (Scheurich, 1997). While one layer of this assimilationist archaeology is a subtractive policy framework that views bilingual education itself as a transitional model for inclusion into the all-English curriculum, the preceding account of the complex nexus between exemption policies and assessment reveals reveal additional layers of subtractive assimilationist assumptions through the development of policies explicitly designed to expose “problems” previously hidden from the general public. And, as such, these policies stoke ideologies that blame the student for failure to rapidly acquire the language, and have historically supported native language dispossession (Aparicio, 2000).

An example of how assimilationist policy archaeology informs the shaping and implementation of accountability policies is revealed through the use of the long discredited (Sánchez, 1954) interference hypothesis (time spent learning content in Spanish should be disciplined because it interferes with preferred English-language acquisition). In considering the expansion of Spanish TAAS to 7th and 8th grade, an additive policy orientation would have identified and provided options for middle-school educators to utilize asset-based instruction and assessment. Unfortunately, not only was the historic struggle for equal educational opportunity through bilingual education sacrificed to the altar of English-language assessment, but a deficiency perspective argument regarding

language interference was dignified, in effect, as a suitable justification. This is made explicit in the 2002 training manual for LPACs. As districts are encouraged to prepare their students for passing the English TAAS, the TEA manual states that RPTE ratings of advanced “are intended to indicate that with another year of effective instruction the students can be expected to engage in standardized testing in English with minimal *language interference*” (TEA, 2002a, p. 63, emphasis added). The use of discourse on language interference refers back to assimilationist archaeologies that undergirded immigrant schooling and large-scale IQ-testing techniques that were common in the first half of the 20th century and that were contested by George Sánchez and others (Sánchez, 1954; Valencia & Suzuki, 2001).

Grinberg and Saavedra (2000) state that bilingual/ESL programs, which originally were developed to challenge hegemonic structures, are now part and parcel of the same system that reproduced the inequalities. Second, they posit that states have used the rhetoric of advocating for bilingual programs and bilingual students without providing for resources. There are similarities in benefits ascribed to RPTE without providing adequate resources for LEP students. Third, along with the implementation of bilingual programs, there has been a systematic use of “valid, scientific” instruments, such as the RPTE, to produce legitimate knowledge to justify student deficits. This is then used to keep students in separate spaces (an ambivalent, “almost” TAAS space) that shelters the interests of those regarded as normal (as these LEP students move to the norm).

The English TAAS, now TAKS, is the linchpin of the Texas Accountability System, notwithstanding the academic and English language needs and challenges facing ELLs. In this case, it seems to function as a policy “sun,” using its gravity to pull in other efforts at equity and reform. Notions of implementation of multiple, compensatory criteria systems, authentic assessment, or expansion of dual-language programs become delimited to orbiting around the English TAAS-centered assessment system. Policy subsystems, such as ELL educational accountability, are dynamic spaces in which advocacy coalitions converge to create policy change over a period of a decade or more (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993.) Policies dynamically evolve through institutions that are themselves intertwined with advocacy coalitions. In the genealogy of the establishment of the RPTE, the tightening of LEP exemption windows, and the non-inclusion of the Spanish TAAS in 7th and 8th grade, the coalitions that revolve around accountability systems as equity have incorporated and delimited, but have also been influenced by bilingual advocacy coalitions. What has emerged is a public, ambivalent policy, such as the one around the RPTE, that took ten years to shape and one in which traditional bilingual advocacy coalition demands (expanded bilingual-education programs, more Spanish-language materials, and more teacher training) are crafted around the demands of accountability outcomes. As is stated in the Texas Education Agency’s Commissioner’s rules concerning LEP students in state assessments, (TEA,

2002d: TEC Chapter 101, Subchapter AA. 1011), “the provisions of this subchapter shall supersede any provisions concerning participation of limited English proficient students found in [the subchapter] relating to adaptations for special populations and this chapter to the extent that inconsistent provisions exist.”

It is important to clarify that “the problem” in LEP student classrooms is not an absence of assessment, but an absence of high-stakes testing. Concerns with exemption rates lead some, like State Representative Domingo García, to conclude that LEP children are tested rarely, which leads to them becoming drop-outs. Within a conservative environment, Latino legislative leadership may have anticipated a cool response to the expansion of a Spanish-language, high-stakes test (TAAS, now TAKS) to 7th and 8th grade, particularly without widespread support from the broader Latino leadership and community. Like Domingo García, they also may have bought the notion that in the absence of testing, the LEP and immigrant children would not have received sufficient attention. Regardless, in the process of constructing the RPTE and its public reporting mechanisms, an archaeologically assimilationist educational policy was reified. Moreover, to the degree that Spanish-language assessment was omitted and English-language assessment was privileged, it normalizes earlier transition bilingual education and the superiority of the most public indicator, English TAAS (Valenzuela & Maxcy, forthcoming). Discourse around LEP youth has quickly refocused on correcting English deficiencies, transitioning students quickly, minimizing language interference, and remedying faults in bilingual instruction because bilingual education is cast as inappropriate and unmotivating toward passage of high-stakes tests. As such, “the ‘smallness’ of the policy solution in relation to the ‘largeness’ of the problem, ...highlights the ‘performance’ nature of this policy solution” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 110).

### Notes

1. The skills-oriented Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was replaced in the 2002–2003 school year with the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), a higher-order, thinking-oriented test.
2. “Transadapted” is the term TEA uses to describe the translation and adaptation of the English TAAS to Spanish.
3. For LEP exemptions, students must be identified as LEP, participate in an ESL or bilingual program, have resided outside the United States for at least 2 consecutive years, be in the first 3 years of enrollment in U.S. schools, and have not received a rating of advanced on the RPTE. Also, the Language Placement and Assessment Committee (LPAC) has to determine that “the students schooling outside the U.S. did not provide the foundation of learning that Texas requires and measures on TAAS” and “the student’s progress by the spring of the school year has not been sufficient to make up for the differences in his or her schooling outside the U.S.” For 2nd- and 3rd-year exemptions, the LPAC must document how “the extensive

absence of schooling outside the U.S. resulted in such limited academic achievement...that an assessment in either English or Spanish is still inappropriate” (TEA, 2002b, 21–22). The labyrinthine process of determining LEP status for testing exemption status, as opposed to for Public Educational Information Management Systems (PEIMS), purposes reflects an incrementalist taxonomy that stimulates inclusion in testing through requiring ever more work and documentation in justifying that exemption.

4. This equity argument seems to ascribe normatively positive notions to this new educational constitutive gaze, wherein the state, in this case embodied in the accountability system, disciplines behaviors of bodies involved in education toward serving all students, distributes power more effectively to schools and children that most need it, and has the possibility of normalizing a belief that all children can learn.

## References

- Amrein, A., & Berliner, D. (2002). High stakes testing, uncertainty, and student learning. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(18), Available: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaal/v10n18>
- Aparicio, F (2000). Of Spanish dispossessed. In R.Dueñas González & I.Melis (Eds.), *Language ideologies: Education and the social implications of official language* (Vol. 1, pp. 248–275). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.
- Brisk, M.E. (1998). *Bilingual education: From compensatory to quality schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.
- Crawford, J. (2000). *At war with diversity: U.S. language policy in an age of anxiety*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J., & Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (Eds.). (1998). *Minority education: From shame to struggle*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Elmore, R., Abelman, C., & Fuhrman, S. (1996). The new accountability in state education reform: From process to performance. In H.Ladd (Ed.), *Holding schools accountable: Performance based reform in education* (pp. 65–98). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Fass, P. (1980). The IQ: A cultural and historical framework. *American Journal of Education* 88(4), 431–58.
- Freeman, R. (1998). *Bilingual education and social change*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- García, E.E. (1994). *Understanding and meeting the challenge of student cultural diversity*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- . (2001). *Hispanic education in the United States: Raices y alas*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- González, A. (2002). *Mexican Americans and the U.S. economy: Quest for buenos días*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Gonzalez, G. (1997). Culture, language, and the Americanization of Mexican children. In A.T. Darder, R. (Ed.), *Latinos and education: A critical reader* (pp. 158–73). New York: Routledge.

- Grinberg, J., & Saavedra, E. (2000). The constitution of bilingual ESL instruction as a disciplinary practice: Genealogical explorations. *Review of Educational Research* 70 (4), 419–41.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lindblom, C. (1950). The science of muddling through. *Public Administration Review*, 19, 79–88.
- McNeil, L. (2000). *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- McNeil, L., & Valenzuela, A. (2001). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In M.Kornhaber & G.Orfield (Eds.), *Raising standards or raising barriers? Inequality and high stakes testing in public education*. New York: Century Foundation.
- Olsen, L. (1997). *Made in America: Immigrant students in our public schools*. New York: The New Press.
- Orfield, G., & Yun, J. (1999). *desegregation in American schools*. Harvard Civil Rights Project [On-line]. Available at: <http://www.law.harvard.edu/groups.civilrights/publications/resegregation99.html>
- Ravitch, D. (2002). Introduction. In D.Ravitch (Ed.), *Brookings papers on education policy* (pp. 1–12). Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Rorrer, A. (2002). Educational leadership and institutional capacity for equity. *UCEA Review* 18(3), 1–5.
- Ruiz de Velasco, J. (2004). Performance-based reforms and the federal role in helping schools that serve language minority students. In A.Valenzuela (Ed.), *Assessment and educational equity: Why Texas style accountability fails Latino youth*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Ruiz de Velasco, J., & Fix, M. (2002). *Overlooked and underserved: Immigrant students in secondary schools*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Sabatier, P., & Jenkins-Smith, H. (1993). *Policy Change and Learning: An advocacy coalition approach*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Sabatier, P., & Mazmanian, D. (1995). A conceptual framework of the implementation process. In S.Theodoulour & M.Cahn (Eds.), *Public policy: The essential readings*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- San Miguel, G. (1997). Roused from our slumbers. In A.T.Darder, R. (Ed.), *Latinos and education: A critical reader* (pp. 135–57). New York: Routledge.
- Sánchez, G.I. (1954). The crux of the dual language handicap. *New Mexico School Review* (March), 13–15, 38.
- Scheurich, J.J. (1997). *Research method in the postmodern*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Scheurich, J., Skrla, L., & Johnson, J. (2000). Thinking carefully about equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 293–99.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J., & Johnson, J. (2000). *Equity-driven achievement-focused school districts: A report on systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations*. Austin, Texas: The Charles A.Dana Center.
- Spring, J. (2001). *The American School: 1642–2000* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.



- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (2000). *Study of possible expansion of the assessment system for Limited English Proficient Students: A report to the 77th Texas Legislature from the Texas Education Agency*. Austin: TEA.
- . S.A.D., Bilingual Education Program Unit,. (2002a). *LPAC decision-making process for the Texas Assessment Program (grades 3–8)*. Austin: Author.
- . (2002b). *1996–1997 State Performance Report*. Austin: Author.
- . (2002c). *2001–2002 State Performance Report*. Austin: Author.
- . (2002d). *Texas Education Code: Chapter 101. Assessment. Subchapter AA. Commissioner's rules concerning the participation of limited English proficient students in state assessments*. Available at [www.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter101/ch101aa.html](http://www.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter101/ch101aa.html)
- Thomas, W., & Collier, V. (1996). *Language minority achievement and program effectiveness*. Fairfax, Va.: Center for Bilingual/Multicultural/ESL Education, George Mason University.
- Trueba, E., & Bartolomé, L. (Eds.). (2000). *Immigrant voices: In search of educational equity*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Trujillo, A. (1998). *Chicano empowerment and bilingual education: Movimiento politics in Crystal City Texas*, New York: Garland.
- Tyack, D. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1991). *America 2000*. Washington, DC: Author.
- . (2002). *OELA Preliminary Guidance*. Washington, DC: Author.
- U.S. Department of Justice. Department of Immigration and Naturalization. (2002). *2001 Statistical yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*. Available at <http://www.ins.usdoj.gov>
- Valencia, R. (Ed.). (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking*. London: Falmer Press.
- Valencia, R., & Suzuki, L. (2001). *Intelligence testing & minority students*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Valencia, R., Valenzuela, A., Sloan, K., & Foley, D. (2001). Let's treat the cause, not the symptoms: Equity and accountability in Texas revisited. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83(4), 318–26.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S. Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Valenzuela, A. (2000). The significance of the TAAS test for Mexican immigrant and Mexican American Adolescents: A Case study. *Hispanic Journal of the Behavioral Sciences* 22(4), 524–39.
- Valenzuela, A. (2002). High-Stakes testing and U.S.-Mexican youth in Texas: The case for multiple compensatory criteria in assessment. *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy* 14,97–116.
- Valenzuela, A. (Ed.). (2004). *Assessment and educational equity: Why Texas style accountability fails Texas youth*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Valenzuela, A., & Maxcy, B. (forthcoming). Limited English proficient youth and accountability (who are tested) count. Urban Institute.
- Vásquez, O. (2003). *La clase mágica: Imagining optimal possibilities in a bilingual community of learners*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

# CHAPTER 17

## The Unintended Consequences of the Texas Accountability System

KATHRYN BELL MCKENZIE

### Introduction

Like the other contributors to this book, the purpose of this brief review is to examine the arguments for and against the Texas accountability system as it promotes equity and social justice for students of color and those living in poverty. However, unlike most of the other authors, I do not represent one of the voices of the academy. Instead, I enter into this discussion, to offer a perspective that comes from the field, at least from my viewpoint as someone who was a teacher for 13 years and a school principal for 8 years.

All of these professional experiences have been in the state of Texas, in rural, urban, and suburban settings. Most germane to this discussion, though, are my experiences as a teacher and, then, principal in large urban schools in which the majority of the students were students of color and students living in poverty. However, my experiences as a teacher and assistant principal in suburban schools in which the majority of the students were White and middle class provide a useful contrast that allows me to see the consequences of the accountability system in both urban and suburban settings.

The discourse related to the accountability system and the resulting consequences, whether from the field or the academy, have, as Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson (2000) contend, been framed as either good or bad, in other words, as a binary. As they also argue, this dyadic view is overly simplistic. I agree that the accountability system is neither all good nor all bad. Just like education itself, it is complex. And, furthermore, with the newly enacted *No Child Left Behind Act*, it is a reality that we must address.

Not only do I agree with Scheurich and his colleagues (2000) that the accountability system is neither all good nor all bad, I also agree with many of their arguments that support the accountability system as improving the education of students of color and advancing equity and social justice. While I agree that in some ways the accountability system has had a positive effect on the education of students of color and the advancement of equity and social justice, there are, also, unintended consequences of the system that may not only negatively affect the education of students of color, but also retard the promotion

of equity and social justice. Therefore, my goal here is not to argue for or against the accountability system. In contrast, I intend to muddy the waters somewhat by problematizing the issues even further and by offering for consideration some issues that are not discussed from a practitioner's perspective in the other chapters.

### **The Argument for the Accountability System as a Tool for Social Justice and Equity**

The argument advanced by Scheurich and his colleagues (2000) is that the accountability system, although not without its flaws, has been a tool to promote social justice and equity. They contend that prior to the accountability system in Texas, schools were not successfully educating students of color. On this, they are right. Indeed, there was—and continues to be—an achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts. This gap does not just exist in Texas, but has been well documented as being pervasive throughout the nation. In fact, there is an abundance of data and research that shows not only that students of color are performing at lower academic levels than their White counterparts (Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000), they are also overrepresented in special education and lower-level classes (Robertson, Kushner, Starks, & Descher, 1994; Olson, 1991; Reglins, 1992; Useem, 1990), are dropping out of school at higher percentages (Cardenas, Montecel, Supik, & Harris, 1992), frequently have teachers that do not believe they can learn or are actively negative in their attitude toward these students (McKenzie, 2001), are underrepresented in gifted and talented classes and other higher level classes (Robertson et al., 1994), are oftentimes educated in schools with less resources (Kozol, 1991) and the least experienced teachers (Urban Teacher Collaborative, 2000), and are more likely to be suspended or expelled (Gordon, Paina, & Kelener, 2000). Scheurich et al. (2000) also pointed out, although some disagree with them (see, for example, Haney, 2001), that student achievement for students of color has improved since the State of Texas began disaggregating the test results by racial groups in 1990. In other words, once schools were held accountable for the achievement of all students, students of color showed improvement on the state accountability test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Nonetheless, the issue that some question is whether achievement on the TAAS test is a valid indicator of real learning (Parker, 2001). However, even if one accepts the argument advanced by Scheurich et al. (2000), that the TAAS test is a valid indicator of student learning and that students of color are improving based on this indicator, there still remains the question of whether the system is advancing social justice and equity.

For example, does improved achievement by students of color on the TAAS test increase the likelihood that these students' life circumstances will be improved? Ultimately, will they be afforded equal access and opportunity? Does improved achievement on this indicator, the TAAS test, really change anything

for these students? Even if the discussion is limited to the advancement of social justice and equity within the context of schools, and some would argue that this, then, is not social justice or equity (see, for example, Anderson, 2001), there are problems with accepting the accountability system as a tool for social justice and equity without considering the unintended consequences of the system. It is these unintended consequences, though, that I will examine in the sections that follow.

However, prior to examining these unintended consequences, I want to return to Scheurich and his colleagues (2000) assertion that the accountability system is neither all good nor all bad. I agree that accountability systems are complex. Therefore, before I discuss what I see as the unintended consequences of the system, I want to make clear what I have seen as the positive effects of this system. First, it is indisputable that there is a nationwide achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts, and furthermore, the data are clear that since the implementation of the Texas accountability system, at least since the data have been disaggregated by racial groups, there has been a narrowing of the achievement gap as based on TAAS performance. Second, since Texas began disaggregating the TAAS data by racial groups, I have witnessed some teachers holding higher standards for all their students. In addition, these teachers have developed strategies to ensure that all students reach these higher standards. Lastly, then, with this improved pedagogy that has led to an increase in student achievement, there has been a change in some teachers' attitudes toward their students who previously had not performed at high levels, typically their students of color and those living in poverty. Therefore, what I have come to know about the merits of the accountability system is that some of the students who historically were not being taught to achieve at high levels are now being taught. I, also, know that based on the test scores, the achievement gap has been closing in Texas. In addition, and this may ultimately be the most important result of the accountability system, I know that some teachers' attitudes towards their students of color have changed. They have learned to see their students as competent learners. These teachers have come to realize that it is what they do in the classroom, their pedagogy, and their high expectations for all students that makes a difference.

Having laid out what I see as the positive effects of this system, I want to turn now to the unintended consequences that may indeed have long-term negative effects on the educational process. These unintended consequences, in my view, may very well result in the perpetuation of the existing hegemony, that is, the dominant discourse that historically privileges the White middle class and their children. The unintended consequences I will address in the following sections include the villainization of students who do not pass the test, the narrowing of the curriculum, and the deskilling of teachers and administrators.

### **The Villainization of Students**

Some have, indeed, argued that instead of advancing social justice and equity the accountability system perpetuates the hegemonic discourse that is replicated and perpetuated in schools (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). One issue has been whether the accountability system has improved or exacerbated the drop-out rate. Some researchers, like McNeil and Valenzuela (2001), have said that students, who have been unsuccessful in passing the exit exam, give up and drop out of school. Then, there are the disagreements over whether the accountability system has narrowed the curriculum (Valenzuela, 1999), and still others argue whether the data collected from the accountability system are even valid (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffey, & Stecher, 2000). And, yet, few have written about the effects, both positive and negative, of the accountability system on the perceptions of teachers and principals toward their students of color.

As a principal, I have seen examples of both positive and negative effects of the accountability system on the perceptions held by educators about their students of color. For example, when I first became a principal in a large urban elementary school, where 80% of the students were students of color and almost the same percentage were living in poverty, I was confronted with teacher attitudes that represented deficit thinking (see, for example, Valencia, 1997) toward the students in the school. That is, the teachers held low expectations for their students, felt sorry for them, and, in general, merely wanted the students to behave appropriately in class. Not only did these teachers believe that the students were incapable of performing at high levels, they worried that if they held the students to high standards, which they believed the students could not meet, that they would damage the students' self-esteem. Therefore, the teachers inflated the students' grades, and, although the students were not working on grade level, if they were well behaved, the teachers communicated to the students and their parents that the students were doing well academically.

Not only were the teachers apathetic toward the performance of students who historically had not performed well, but the school district as a whole placed little emphasis on the high achievement of students from low-income families. Although the accountability system was in effect at the time I became principal, there was little emphasis in my district on "low-income" schools improving their accountability ratings. As long as the school was not labeled "low-performing" and, thus, at risk of state sanctions, there was very little district pressure to improve the ratings. However, with a change in superintendents and increased accountability-driven sanctions from the state, the pressure to improve ratings escalated considerably. With the threat of sanctions and the increased awareness of the community on the importance of the test, some of the teachers raised expectation levels for their students and changed their teaching strategies to better meet the needs of the students.

Initially, the change in expectations and practice was not because the teachers had become enlightened or developed a sense of social justice, it was because

they felt they had no other choice. However, with their change in practice, came improved student performance, which for some led to a change in their attitudes toward the students. They began to see the students as competent, capable learners. There were, however, other teachers who did not change their attitudes toward their students, but rather looked at the increase in student performance as a testament to the teachers' expertise in, what they perceived as, the most difficult of circumstances. Consequently, whereas it is often thought that changing attitudes must precede a change in behavior, in this instance, the change in teacher behavior, which led to increased student achievement, resulted in a change in teacher perceptions, at least, for some teachers. One could argue, then, that the accountability system, or at least the pressure associated with the system, became a tool for social justice and equity, as these relate to closing the achievement gap.

Nonetheless, while there were positive effects of the accountability system as it relates to teacher attitudes toward their students of color, the converse was also true. One of the most disturbing unintended consequences of the accountability system was some teachers' villainization of the students who did not perform well on the test. The teachers seemed to feel that the students were keeping them, the teachers who were working hard, from being regarded as successful teachers. In other words, the students' failure was somehow seen as a personal attack on the students' teachers. These teachers did not look at their practices as being ineffective, but, instead, characterized the students as the source of their failure and thus as deficit.

These teachers did not believe in their own efficacy in regards to improving the achievement of students. Rather, they felt the students were incapable of performing at high levels. When students did not perform well on the test, the teachers interpreted the data as confirmation that there was something wrong with the students. The teachers said the students did not come to school prepared to learn, they came from families that did not value education, they were poorly behaved, they did not care about learning, or, most disturbing of all, they were genetically inferior (however disturbing it is, some did cite this as the source of the problem). Furthermore, their negative attitudes toward their students resulted in a lowering of their expectations for the students, which, in turn, resulted in lower performance by the students and, ultimately, a reification of the deficit-thinking attitudes held by these teachers.

One has to wonder, then, how the students themselves felt about being perceived as deficit and what the teachers were modeling for the other students in their classes. For instance, in some classes, there was an obvious differentiation in treatment among those students who were deemed as capable and those who were not. In addition, not only were students treated differently, in an effort to avoid being held accountable for the students who were not performing well, the teachers looked for ways to "get around the test." They attempted to refer students to special-education or remedial classes; they suggested students be demoted to the previous grade; and, if a student was on a transfer from another

school, they recommended revocation of the transfer so the student's test scores would not count on their class report.

Although I have been discussing the teachers with whom I directly worked, their comments were not atypical. In a recent research project I conducted with White teachers who taught in a school populated predominantly by students of color, the teachers at this second school held many of the same deficit notions about their students (McKenzie, 2001). Moreover, these deficit attitudes have not only been held by teachers, but by principals as well (Nelson, 2002). Rarely, did I hear a principal say that she or he had yet to figure out how to be successful with all students; rather, the responsibility was typically turned away from the educators with the blame placed on the students, that is, they blamed the victim. Indeed, principals would frequently say that a specific population group, like the Hispanic students or the African-American students, kept their school from being "recognized" or "exemplary." Therefore, not only were individual students villainized for poor performance, but also entire groups of students, typically based on their racial identity, were blamed for the poor performance of a school.

Consequently, although there were some positive effects of the accountability system in that some teachers and principals, who previously did not believe students of color and those living in poverty could achieve at high levels, changed their attitudes and behaviors toward their students, there were some damning effects as well. Those students who were not performing well on the test were villainized by some teachers. Their difficulty in passing the TAAS test was seen as evidence of what some educators already believed, which was that these students were incapable of performing at high levels. The teachers and principals, thus, resented these students and student groups because they felt that regardless of the teachers' efforts to improve their students' scores, the students could not learn and, then ultimately, the teachers and school would be held accountable for something they felt they could not affect.

### **The Narrowing of the Curriculum**

Valenzuela (1999) and McNeil (2000) have criticized the accountability system for its negative effects on the curriculum. They contend that the curriculum has been narrowed for some students—particularly those who are deemed as needing extra help in the subjects that are tested and typically these are students of color and those living in poverty. However, conversely, in some schools, the curriculum has been broadened for those students who need little help passing the test, typically White middle-class students. In my experiences as a principal, I have witnessed both the narrowing and broadening of the curriculum as a result of accountability.

In an effort to have all their students do well on the test, some schools have narrowed the curriculum to address only the subjects that are tested or, worse yet, to address just the assessed knowledge and skills tested within subjects. In other words, students who were not successful on the TAAS might get

intensified instruction in the areas that are tested, for example, reading and math, to the exclusion of other content areas like science and social studies. And, in some schools this intensification in reading and math was limited to only tested areas of reading and math. This limiting of what was taught, in other words, this narrowing of the curriculum, might affect the whole school, whole classes, or specific students or groups of students. For example, if the majority of the students in a school were not performing well, it might be decided that the entire school should increase the time spent on the tested subjects to the exclusion of other subjects. Or, if only a group of students were having difficulty, these students might be pulled out of non-tested classes, like science or social studies, for tutoring in the tested subjects in which they were having difficulty. Therefore, instead of promoting equity, these practices limited the access students had to important content that could affect their opportunities later on.

Another way in which the curriculum has been narrowed was that students were only assisted or taught in tested academic areas so that content areas that address the humanness of the child were eliminated from the curriculum and school activities. For example, it could be argued that the aesthetic, physical, and emotional nature of the child was ignored or downplayed because of the overwhelming pressure to succeed on tested academics (Foshay, 2000). In fact, not only were these aspects of a wellrounded education overlooked, but Valenzuela (1999) would argue that what was taught and tested in schools perpetuated the values of the dominant culture, that is, the White middle class. This deference to the dominant White culture, thus, literally subtracted from the culture of children of color. In other words, when students of color are required to appropriate the values of the dominant culture to succeed, their own culture has been denigrated and moved to the margins.

Not only, though, was the curriculum limited for some students, it was broadened for others. For example, when I was the assistant principal at a predominately White upper middle-class suburban school, the students who attended this school, for the most part, did extremely well on the TAAS test. The teachers at the school were good; however, they were no better than the teachers at the urban school in which I was principal. However, the students at the suburban school performed better on the test. They were not smarter than the students at the urban school, but the experiences and knowledge that the middle-class students brought to school better matched the skills necessary to achieve on the test. In addition, the information tested and the manner of testing fit well the middle-class culture these students were raised in. Thus, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have said, the *habitus* of the White middle-class students' homes fit well the *habitus* of their schools.

Therefore, these White suburban students had less to learn to score well on the test, and their culture was more congruent with the manner of the testing. Moreover, as a result of less time being needed to teach these students the skills needed for the test, they were provided with both in-school and out-of-school experiences that continued to further enhance their learning. They went on field



trips, had guest speakers and performances, entered science fairs, and engaged in-depth with technology, among other supplemental activities. As a result, the curriculum was broadened for them. It was, then, this broadening of the curriculum for some students, chiefly White middle-class ones, while narrowing the curriculum for others, chiefly children of color and children from low-income homes, that continued to perpetuate the achievement gap, the injustice, and the inequity.

Although I have argued that the achievement gap was perpetuated by the broadening of the curriculum for some students, while narrowing it for others, the issue is not as straightforward or as simplistic as it may first seem. Yes, the curriculum may be narrowed or subtracted for those students who are not performing well on the test. And, yes, the majority of these students are students of color and those living in poverty. However, this particular phenomenon did not begin with the accountability system. Prior to the initiation of this system, students of color and students from poor families were not engaged in a substantive way in a broad, meaningful curriculum. Thus, neither was the past all good nor is the present all bad.

To illustrate, recently, I overheard two doctoral students arguing about the merits of the accountability system. One female African-American student said to the other student that she wished the accountability system had been in place when she was in school because maybe then it would have forced her teachers to teach her *something*. This is not the first time that I or others have heard this. In fact, in a recent visit to my district, Gloria Ladson-Billings made the same point. These comments, by the female African-American student, by Ladson-Billings and by others for whom the educational system was a failure, reflect the sentiments of many proponents of the accountability system who are people of color and who understand that they themselves, their children, and their grandchildren have for a long time been shortchanged in public education. They are much less upset by the problems with the accountability system if this type of system is what it takes to get schools to actually teach their children in a focused and successful way. They just want to ensure that their children are being taught.

Thus, the effects of the accountability system are that it has both narrowed the curriculum for those students who have historically been underserved and broadened the curriculum for those students who have been privileged, thereby in this regard, widening the achievement gap. However, as I have stated previously, this is a complex issue. Whereas the accountability system has widened the gap with this narrowing and broadening of the curriculum, it has, at a minimum, forced teachers to teach those students who they previously regarded as difficult to teach or unteachable.

### **The De-skilling of Teachers and Principals**

Another unintended consequence of the accountability system has been the de-skilling of the teaching and principal force. Some schools and school districts in

an effort to standardize the teaching practices of their teachers have implemented what they consider to be “teacher proof” programs that align with the TAAS test and leave little room for teacher error. Often times these programs are scripted, that is, telling teachers exactly what to say and do. It can certainly be argued that for some new teachers and for those teachers who are marginal in their skills, this support may lead to an increase in student performance. In other words, when teachers do not know what to teach or how to teach and when there is the systematic implementation of any program, there is the likelihood that student performance will improve. For example, in my own practice, I have encouraged new teachers, particularly those who entered the teaching field from an alternative certification program in which they had little student teaching experience prior to becoming a teacher, to rely more heavily on the textbooks and the teachers’ editions to these textbooks than experienced teachers who have the expertise to craft lessons to meet the individual needs of their students. However, at our school, this practice of reliance on “resources” was always coupled with mentoring by a master teacher. The process was the same for mentoring new teachers as it was for teaching children, that is, provide support and guidance and gradually release the teacher to develop their own lessons when they have the needed skills. This is simply using Vygotsky’s (1989) zone of proximal development.

However, this gradual-release model is not what has been implemented in many schools; rather, teachers, many of whom have the skills to both align the curriculum to the state standards and craft lessons that move all their students to mastery of these standards, have been given mandates that they must follow scripted and sequenced lessons. Indeed, some administrators have expected to see the exact same lesson taught in the exact same way in every class in a grade level or content area. Not only is this an attempt to “teacher proof” the curriculum, it is not good pedagogy. This teacher proofing of the curriculum assumes that every student in every class has the same needs, learns the same way, or learns within the same time frame.

Moreover, not only have teachers been given “scripts” for teaching, they have been given scope and sequences to ensure that they stay on schedule with their teaching. Again, in schools in which the majority of the students’ skills match those that were being taught and tested, this was not particularly problematic. Teachers in this situation were able to meet the time frame required in the scope and sequence and then moved on, within the allotted time frame, to extend and enrich the curriculum. However, in schools in which students needed more time to develop requisite skills, what often happened was that teachers, in an effort to meet the required sequence of the curriculum, taught content not students. They complained, as irrational as this may sound, that there was not time to work on the requisite skills that students needed to understand the new concept or content that was being introduced. Therefore, they ignored the needs of the students and taught the content that had been designated for that particular time in the school year. This was exacerbated by the fact that, coupled with the scope and

sequence, was a testing schedule that required students to be tested at intervals, usually 4 to 6 weeks, on what the teacher was expected to cover.

In my district, 15 days or portions of days were designated for these tests, which did not include the required 3 days of TAAS testing. As one can see, this, then, eliminated teaching days that could have been used for helping all students meet the standards. Ironically, the district spent millions of dollars yearly on providing summer school to those students who needed additional help or time to meet the required standards. The time allotted for summer school was approximately 20 days, nearly the same amount of instructional days being lost to testing. This being said, I am not advocating for a *laissez-faire* approach to curriculum writing, assessment, or accountability, nor am I advocating for teachers deciding what to teach based only on their own interests. I do believe that frequent assessment of students' progress, when used to inform instructional practices, is critical; that all students should be held to high standards based on an agreed-upon curriculum that prepares them to be successful in life; and that, as educators, we should be held accountable for the success of each and every student. I am, however, concerned that out of fear of poor performance on the TAAS test and the resulting sanctions associated with that failure that we are in the process of institutionalizing practices that may result in short-term successes but long-term negative consequences for some children.

One of these long-term negative consequences is the dismantling of a qualified teaching and administrative corp. One of the complaints I have heard from both teachers and principals (Nelson, 2002) has been that the increased pressure to standardize and homogenize the curriculum and teaching practices is taking the joy out of teaching. The educators I refer to are not marginal educators; they are educators I consider to be among the best and brightest. They are the ones who have positively impacted the systems in which they work. Last year alone, several teachers at my school either left the profession, took a position at a charter school, or went to work in districts in which they felt there would be less pressure to do well on the TAAS test.

This, though, is only part of the story. Almost daily I had conversations with teachers and principal colleagues who complained of the increased pressure of the job since the advent of the accountability system. Not only did they feel pressured to ensure that all students performed well on the test so that the school and, most importantly, the students were not subject to sanctions, but they told me that they felt tremendous ethical dissonance when asked or mandated to implement practices and programs they felt were not in the best interest of the students. In general, they felt a loss of joy and love of the work. Even as I write this, I just got off the phone with a principal colleague who told me that three of her teachers were placed on medication by their doctors to treat conditions resulting from work-related stress.

This principal was saddened by these events and felt defeated. She said she was going to leave the profession because she just could not participate in a system that had these kinds of negative effects on her teachers. One might argue

that the stress these teachers are feeling and the defeatist attitude taken by the principal are their own issues, in other words, that these educators are *allowing* themselves to feel stressed or defeated. This maybe true. However, the fact remains that if they are ill and cannot work and if they leave the profession, there are not an abundance of qualified teachers and principals waiting in line to take their positions.

Therefore, we see that in an effort to systematically address the demands of the accountability system, some schools and school districts have implemented programs and processes that rigidly standardize the curriculum and instructional practices in schools. The positive effect of this standardization has been that some teachers who may not have known what to teach and how to teach it are given something upon which to rely. Therefore, these teachers' students may have learned more as a result of this imposed system. However, those educators who have the experience and the expertise to teach effectively without being told what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach, no longer have the opportunity to try new approaches, to create and to learn—for them, the joy of teaching is gone.

### **Conclusion**

I have attempted here to raise some issues from a practitioner's perspective that have not been sufficiently discussed, in my view, in the conversation related to the accountability system as a tool for advancing social justice and equity. I chose to balance my comments so as not to offer merely a critique, but to tell from a practitioners' point of view what I experienced as the positive effects of the system as well as those issues that have been problematic, the unintended consequences. Therefore, let me state, again, that I agree with Scheurich and his colleagues (2000) that the accountability system is neither all good nor all bad.

The positive effects of the system have been instrumental in advancing social justice and equity. Since the implementation of the accountability system the achievement gap between students of color and those students living in poverty and their White middle-class counterparts has narrowed. In addition, some teachers have been holding higher expectations for their students; teaching those students who historically have been undereducated; and because these teachers have been seeing improved performance from the students they may not have thought could achieve at high levels, they are thinking more positively about their students of color and those living in poverty.

However, although the accountability system has, in some ways, advanced social justice and equity, in other ways, the negative unintended consequences of the system have, I believe, been detrimental to the promotion of these causes. First, I have argued that since the State of Texas has begun to disaggregate and report test data by population group that students of color have been performing at higher levels on the TAAS test, thereby seemingly closing the achievement gap. However, an unintended consequence of the transparency of these disaggregated reports has sometimes been the villainization of those students or

student groups who historically have not performed up to expectations, those typically being students of color. Second, although the accountability system may be ensuring that students, who were previously not taught or not taught well, are being educated, the focus on tested subjects to the exclusion of other content has resulted in a narrowing of curriculum for those students who need extra help or more time to learn what is tested, and again, for the most part, these are students of color and those living in poverty. In addition, while the curriculum is being narrowed for some students, it continues to be broadened for those students who come to school with skills and knowledge that match the test, typically White middle-class students. This, then, widens the achievement gap. Lastly, in an effort to try to ensure the success of all students, schools and school districts have implemented programs and systems to standardize and teacher-proof the curriculum. Although this maybe helpful to new or marginal teachers, it, ultimately, may lead to a de-skilling of teachers and principals. More alarming is the effect this homogenation is having on our most gifted educators who are the ones who innovate and eventually define “best practices.” Many of these educators have been and are leaving public education, putting their talents to use elsewhere.

Quite simply, then, accountability systems, as Scheurich and his colleagues (2000) contend, are neither all good nor all bad; rather, they are complex with both intended and unintended consequences. Therefore, when assessing the accountability system as a tool for advancing social justice and equity, we must consider both the immediate and long-term effects of the system. In addition, we must look at the system from multiple vantage points to ensure that in our efforts to do the “right thing,” to provide all students with an education that will ensure their success, that we do not overlook the unintended consequences of the system that could, ultimately, exacerbate the current situation and reinforce and perpetuate current inequities. Therefore, we must accept Scheurich and Skrla’s (2001) invitation to thoughtfully consider many views, and here I must emphasize that we must thoughtfully consider the views of those in the state houses, the academy, and the field. We must listen to each other, so that we can “make useful progress toward a new consensus on high academic achievement for all children” (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2001, p. 233).

## References

- Anderson, G. (2001). Promoting educational equity in a period of growing social inequity: The silent contradictions of Texas reform discourse. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 320–32.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Campbell, J., Hombo, C., & Mazzeo, J. (2000). *NAEP 1999 trends in academic progress: Three decades of student performance*. (NCES 2000469) Washington: D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.

- Cardenas, J.A., Montecel, M.R., Supik, J.D., & Harris, R.J. (1992). The Coca-Cola valued youth program. Drop-out prevention strategies for at-risk students. *Texas Researcher* 3, 111–30.
- Foshay, A.W. (2000). *The curriculum: Purpose, substance, practice*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gordon, R., Paina, L. & Kelener, T. (2000, March). *Suspension, expulsions, and zero tolerance policies*. Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center.
- Haney, W. (2001). The illusion of educational equity in Texas: a commentary on 'accountability for equity'. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 4(3), 267–75.
- Klein, S.P., Hamilton, L.S., McCaffey, D.F., & Stecher, B.M. (2000). *What do test scores in Texas tell us?* (Issue Paper 202). Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown.
- McKenzie, K.B. (2001). *White teachers' perceptions about their students of color and themselves as White educators*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- McNeil, L.M., (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- McNeil, L.M., & Valenzuela, A. (2001). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In G.Orfield and M.L.Kornhaber (Eds.). *Raising standards or raising barriers: Inequality and high-stakes testing in public education* (127–50). New York: The Century Foundation.
- Nelson, S. (2002). Dissertation. *Oppression, conflict, and collusion: High-stakes accountability from the perspective of three social justice principals*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.
- Olson, P. (1991). *Referring language minority students to special education*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 328 131).
- Parker, L. (May, 2001). Statewide assessment triggers urban school reform: But how high the stakes for urban minorities? *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 313–19.
- Reglins, G. (1992). Ability grouping: A scoring instrument. *Illinois Schools Journal*, Fall, 43–47.
- Robertson, P., Kushner, M., Starks, J., & Descher, C. (1994). An update of participation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education: The need for a research and policy agenda. *The Bilingual Special Education Perspective* 14(1), 3–9.
- Scheurich, J.J., Skrla, L., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). Thinking carefully about equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 82(4), 293–99.
- Scheurich, J.J., & Skrla, L. (2001). Continuing the conversation on equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83(4), 322–26.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2001). Toward a new consensus on high academic achievement for all children. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 227–34.
- Urban Teacher Collaborative. (2000, January). *Urban teacher shortages most severe in areas critical to raising student performance*. Belmont, MA: RNT.
- Useem, El L. (1990). You're good, but you're not good enough: Tracking students out of advanced mathematics. *American Educator* 14(3), 24–27, 43–46.
- Valencia, R. (Ed.). (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking*. Washington DC: Falmer.

- Valencia, R., Valenzuela, A., Sloan, K., & Foley, D. (2001). Let's treat the cause, not the symptoms: Equity and accountability in Texas revisited. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83(4), 318–21,326.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University Press.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1989). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

# CHAPTER 18

## Intersections in Accountability Reform

### *Complexity, Local Actors, Legitimacy, and Agendas*

ANDREA K. RORRER

Regardless of the impetus for current accountability reforms, these reforms have captured a broad audience of institutional and noninstitutional actors (Cahn, 1995). Moreover, accountability systems, which are a prominent aspect of the current national reform agenda, have had a profound effect on policy and practice in educational organizations from school classrooms to universities.<sup>1</sup> Most educational organizations realize the necessity to respond quickly in this accountability-driven environment to increasing demands and expectations for substantially higher levels of academic achievement for all children. A district administrator illustrated this consciousness when she explained that educational institutions are expected to now “belly up to the bar” and improve student performance.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, many practitioners and policy makers have translated these demands into an opportunity to dislocate inequity and to improve teaching and learning. To accomplish this task, districts and schools are aligning policies, structures, and practices with a commitment to equity for all.

As evidenced by many of the authors in this book, the potential for state accountability systems to contribute to the institutionalization of equitable outcomes for all exists, particularly by the aforementioned means, yet vital skepticism remains. For instance, Anderson (2001) asserted that “defense of the Texas reform seems less convincing and at times naïve” because “educational equity is on the front burner precisely at the same time that our society is becoming increasingly inequitable” (p. 325). However, two compelling rationales support the current developments and focus on accountability systems and their potential equity effects. The first rationale includes the historical proclivity of the American public to rely upon schools to improve social circumstances. Cuban (1990), who questioned the effectiveness of this trend, summarized that generally, “If society has an itch, schools get scratched” (p. 9). A growing discontent with public schooling provides the second persuasive reason for educational equity to emerge as a fundamental component of current reforms. Evidence of this discontent includes both increased federal intervention and public schooling alternatives.

The commentary and critiques in this volume further demonstrate that previous research findings on state accountability reforms remain controversial. Nevertheless, recent research fosters our understanding of the breadth and depth



of these reforms. For example, research to date has addressed policy development and design, refinement, and implementation issues to determine whether accountability policy outcomes match policy intent (Carnoy, Loeb, & Smith, 2001; Fuhman, 1999; Heck, 2000; Grissmer & Flanagan, 2001; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Mintrop, MacLellan, & Quintero, 2001; Pauken, Kallio, & Stockard, 2001; Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000; Stapleman, 2000). This chapter contributes to the dialogue by addressing the complex, contextual dimensions of state accountability reform in 2002; the vital intersection of local actors with state accountability systems; the function of accountability systems in helping districts and schools attain, maintain, and even regain legitimacy; and, finally, the imperative of actively shaping the reform agenda.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, the attention from researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and the public has converged to create the current agenda that couples equity with excellence. However, complacency cannot be afforded. After all, whether or not these systems can maintain their current influential status or even increase the political, social, and economical capital capacity of all individuals remains unknown.

### **Essential Complexities in Accountability Reform**

Demands for student and institutional accountability and sentiments towards accountability in and for public education are now at a zenith, particularly with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2001, the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* Act. The attention to accountability garnered thus far by the reauthorization of ESEA potentially surpasses the awareness *A Nation at Risk* spurred in 1983 when it proclaimed crisis in American public education. *NCLB* reinforces and exceeds the provisions of previous national policies enacted since the emergence of *A Nation at Risk* including the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the Improving America's School Act, which focused on standardsbased reforms, schoolwide programs, and local flexibility.

*NCLB* elicits fervor among both proponents and opponents of accountability for several reasons. First, the policy and practice ramifications associated with this legislation—which is based on four guiding principles: increased accountability, flexibility and local control, enhanced parental choice, and a focus on scientifically based research—are largely undetermined for state and local education agencies. Next, *NCLB* blurs the boundaries between federal, state, and local authority for public education. Third, both contradictions and tension persist between the structure and the flexibility inherent in the policy's design. Although *NCLB* seemingly has provisions for states to retain their individualism and authority, the specific requirements stipulated for state standards, assessments, and accountability systems throughout the United States are likely to induce more similarity between state policies over the next 3–5 years. For example, each state *must* have a “single, state accountability system that

will be effective in ensuring that all local education agencies, public elementary schools, and public secondary schools make adequate yearly progress”<sup>4</sup> (USDE, 2001, p. 22).

To some, the provisions of *NCLB* seem at odds with the Tenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which delineates the lines of authority for public education. U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley’s 1998 address to the National Press Club captures the basic principle adhered to: “Education is a state responsibility, a local function, and a national priority.” Although states have at least rhetorically increased decentralization to the local districts and schools, many states have of their own volition assumed a greater role for education reform in the last decade, including the development of highly sophisticated accountability systems (e.g., Texas and North Carolina). As McRobbie (1998) observed, “faced increasingly with a ‘change it or lose it’ message about public education, states are adopting a get-tough approach: results-oriented school accountability systems with teeth” (p. 1). Some of these emerging systems emphasize increasing the learning and achievement for all students. Consequently, some systems have begun deferring the fundamental differences between the quality and equality of schooling opportunities in America created by state unpreparedness and neglect of responsibility for educating all children.

The complexity and comprehensiveness of currently developed state accountability systems vary. Certainly, these systems have not been created equally to date. As Finn and Kanstroroom (2001), who advocate marketbased reforms, assert:

That a handful of states are doing it right proves that it can be done. Yet, eleven years after the first national education summit and the setting of national education goals, standards-based reform is not well established in the United States, (p. 163)

Moreover, all districts and schools have not responded to these systems with the same sense of urgency and responsibility (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999).

Despite positive results associated with individual aspects, the complexity and variance in state accountability system design and consistency of implementation complicate the ability to conduct state comparisons and discern in fact which system components or combination thereof possess the greatest promise for general improvement or serve as equity inducers. For example, Grissmer & Flanagan (2001) provide the following cautions when attempting to compare state accountability systems, particularly isolating system features responsible for increased student performance.

The timing, range, and intensity of systemic reform efforts are often too complex to be characterized by single variables that can be used in multivariate models. Even if they could be, the state-by-state data are not yet readily available that can characterize such efforts. Also, more than one

initiative often is implemented at the same time because legislative reform packages typically include several reform initiatives. Finally, the expected dynamic pattern of effects across grades and time is largely unknown, making fine-grained measurements problematic to interpret, (p. 186)

The complexity of attributing causal relationships between accountability system components and system effects on teaching and learning is a daunting task. However, a few of the components appear consistently to influence the effectiveness, particularly equity effects, associated with state accountability systems.

For example, as Fuller and Johnson (2001) highlight:

The nature of the testing system is probably not the salient factor of the state [Texas] accountability system. Instead, the power of the system is more likely tied to the structure of the rating system, the use of disaggregated data, and the mandate that districts get substantial percentages of each demographic group of students to achieve state expectations, (p. 281)

Among the factors Fuller and Johnson cite, disaggregation of data is the component with potentially the greatest power to influence state, district, and school efforts to ensure equity; it is a primary requirement of *NCLB*. Aggregated data permits the performance of individual student groups, particularly those traditionally underserved, to be cloaked. On the other hand, disaggregated data diminishes this prospect as institutional and noninstitutional actors receive concrete and *hard to miss, hard to dismiss* evidence that disparities in achievement exist among and between student groups. A district administrator from Texas explained the ability to overlook the performance of some students in the past and the subsequent influence of the state's accountability system, particularly the disaggregated-data component of it:

Well, I think that historically not just in [the district], but in Texas, there was an attitude that if you have 90 percent of your population passing TAAS, that's pretty good. You don't need to worry about the other 10 percent. And now there's accountability for the other 10 percent. And there are no excuses and that includes the special education. It includes the economically disadvantaged. It includes the drop-outs.

Though some administrators such as the one just quoted have seen that disaggregation of data can be used to create conditions that support equitable outcomes, extreme variation in the readiness in other states to implement this accountability requirement exists. Consider the following information that demonstrates this range of variation. According to *Education Week* (2001), recent figures indicate that all 50 states have student testing programs, but not all

measure state standards. In a precursor to *Quality Counts 2003*, Olson (2002) reported that 30 states rate schools; 48 states issue school report cards; 17 reward schools; 28 provide assistance to low-performing schools, and 23 sanction failing schools. Furthermore, the report indicates that of the 48 states that issue report cards, 25 disaggregate their data by special education /disability; 20 by race/ethnicity; 19 by poverty; and 19 by limited English proficiency. Only 16 states apparently currently disaggregate the data by all student categories currently delineated in *NCLB*. Again, the legislation stipulates that all states must disaggregate their data by multiple student groups including: students who are economically disadvantaged, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to current state-by-state variation in accountability policies, state accountability systems, regardless of their complexity or comprehensiveness, face multiple levels of interpretation and implementation, particularly given that 14,859 districts and 88,548 schools nationwide (NCES, 2002) sieve these policies before implementation. Therefore, local policy mediation contextualizes both state-to-state and within state comparisons. The next section considers the intricate role and response of local education agencies in the implementation of accountability policies.

### **The Intersection of State Accountability Systems and Local Actors**

Discussions devoid of the complexity of state accountability systems, such as those aspects previously addressed, and the larger context in which these systems interact with local actors and the local environment hold little promise for moving our educational organizations toward equitable inputs, processes, and outcomes. Institutional and noninstitutional actors mediate the implementation and consequences of accountability policies through their interpretation, motivation, and commitment to the policy intent. Spillane (2002) advances this argument and emphasizes the crucial role of district leaders. He explains, “District officials must decipher what a policy means to decide whether and how to ignore, adapt, or adopt policy proposals into local policies and practices” (p. 377). In addition, Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson (2002), who conducted research of the standards-based professional development statewide reform initiative in Michigan, provide this consideration, “Districts [and schools] are not blank slates, but rather places with particular histories and competing forces that shape the implementation of any new policy” (p. 808). District leaders and teachers can be characterized as “street-level bureaucrats” (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Lipsky, 1980) because of their significant role in filtering and implementing accountability policies. These local actors serve as a crucial link between policy intent and subsequent policy outcomes. Thus, it is imperative to consider impending environmental influences on local actor preferences and their decisions to act. For instance, as schools and districts navigate responsibility for

the education of all children, they must continuously contend with competing values and interests in what can be contested territory. Dominant interests often determine whose values manifest in the educational structures, processes, policies, and practices in any given community. Historically, these interests and the tacit social beliefs and practices that accompany them have sustained educational institutions at the expense of equity.

State accountability systems can disrupt this legacy of inequity in public schools. Yet, Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, and Foley (2001), who believe “A central tenet is the accountability of schools and districts to the communities they serve” (p. 321), suggest the state should be relegated to a supportive role while the “schools and districts [should] assume primary responsibility over both assessment and its relation to retention, promotion, and graduation decisions” (p. 321). Unquestionably, districts and schools must be accountable to the micro- and macro-environment in which they are situated. However, relegating *sole* responsibility for the design and implementation of student or institutional accountability to the local level, including local elites, seems inefficient and, in some cases, detrimental. For example, locally developed accountability systems are likely to reflect and to be more susceptible to the influence of local “political factors that shape the reform agenda” (Hess, 1999, p. 126). According to Hannaway (1993), local factors “[are] a likely significant force that produces variability in how institutional organizations, operating in the same institutional environment and with similar technologies carry out their work” (p. 160). This argument compliments the suggestion that local institutional actors serve as street-level bureaucrats. Furthermore, it also demonstrates that political factors exist as an impending influence on translating state accountability policies into outcomes that reflect equity and excellence for all students at the district and school levels.

While I advocate for state accountability systems in general, I also concur that consideration of current provisions for the role and response of local actors and subsequent local accountability systems (i.e. planning, operations, development and implementation), particularly those that use the state system as a foundation or framework, seems worthwhile. For instance, the Texas accountability system, which the state acknowledges “is not a comprehensive system of performance evaluation” (TEA, 2002, p. 112), is based on seven guiding principles, including the one that states that the state accountability system “relies on local school districts to develop and implement local accountability systems that complement the state system” (p. 2). The state supports the importance of locally developed accountability systems to augment the state developed system. The state’s *Accountability Manual* illustrates this provision:

Communities across Texas have varied needs and goals for the school districts educating their students. Local systems of accountability need to address those priorities. The state system is meant to be a starting point for locally developed accountability systems.... Regardless of the strategy

chosen, local accountability systems should be designed to serve the needs of the local community and to improve performance for all students. (TEA, 2002, p. 112)

To achieve compatibility between the state and local systems, some states and districts are creating an environment in which increased accountability for student achievement accompanies increased flexibility in strategies available for use at the local level. As one North Carolina district administrator described it, “The more flexibility you ask for, the more accountable you become for those actions that you are taking.” Another Texas administrator explained that flexibility and decentralization were preferable when states, districts, and schools “have an accountability piece.” In these districts, accountability for the performance and growth of all students remains a central tenet in the development of local initiatives to improve teaching and learning.

Reconciling the local accountability system, which addresses local contextual needs and organizational and community values, with the state’s accountability system provides advantages for districts. State accountability systems provide political weight needed by districts to implement a local accountability system that supports educational equity. Another advantage of this alignment is the increased ability of districts and schools to maintain their legitimacy, an issue that is addressed in the next section.

### **Equity, Legitimacy, and Institutional Conformity**

Fundamental changes in educational organizations have occurred because of waning public approval, increasing political attention at all levels, and mounting demands for excellence and equity for all. In fact, accountability systems in general have emanated from these external pressures and growing demands (Ogawa, Crowson, & Goldring, 1999). A Texas superintendent, who has been able to “have a very effective accountability system but one that’s developmental and constructive and professional as opposed to harsh” defended the necessity for the emergence of the state’s accountability system and emphasized why local systems alone are insufficient. He observed:

If school systems had responded professionally to the use of data and to student achievement, then we would not have needed the state accountability system. It was because school systems didn’t respond to that, that the public and the business community in the state insisted on an accountability system.

Thus, state accountability systems, which designate through some symbolic sorting system (e.g., *exemplary*, *recognized*, *acceptable*, *low-performing*, Level I, Level II, Level III, or Level IV) an evaluation of schooling, cannot be dismissed. Many constituents rely on these systems and the high stakes for

students, teachers, schools, and administrators that accompany them (i.e. evaluations, implications for promotion, graduation eligibility, rewards and sanctions in the form of assistance, intervention, and reconstitution from the state) to determine whether their districts or schools can be defined as *good schools*. Consequently, accountability systems today serve a fundamental role in providing legitimacy for local schools and districts. “Accountability policies,” as Macpherson (1998) confirms, “are also the guarantor and, therefore, an appropriate litmus test of the quality of education services” (p. 456). If there is doubt whether accountability systems can legitimize or delegitimize public educational institutions, consider the requirements of the *NCLB* Act, including the parental choice provisions and concurrent speculation that these provisions move public education closer to more market-based educational opportunities such as vouchers.

Accountability systems either limit responses or create boundless opportunities to modify the behavior of actors throughout the educational enterprise. Although structured inequalities and stratified learning opportunities remain, state accountability systems provide legitimacy and an umbrella of safety for districts and schools to alter their leadership and teaching contrary to interests that would otherwise be content with the bell curve or other deficit models of achievement. Stories of success filter within districts, across states, and through national networks and prompt others to achieve similar results, including educational equity, by adopting or co-opting similar alternatives to the regulatory constraints of accountability policies (i.e. the domino effect). As districts and schools are deemed successful, the “contagion of legitimacy” (Zucker, 1988) also expands and serves as a powerful motivator within a strong accountability environment for institutional and organizational changes. These changes are encouraged as demands for technical performance (Rowan & Miskel, 1999, p. 365) and institutional conformity increase. Consider the following examples of this phenomenon.

In their district research, Skrla and Scheurich (2001) revealed the importance of an “exemplar school district or, by extension, superintendents demonstrating that district-wide high academic performance for racially and economically diverse students is possible and achievable” (p. 238). Success attained by some schools and districts with high concentrations of poverty, for example, demonstrates to others, as a district administrator explained, that “all the kids can [achieve well] if we provide the program, the right kind of enthusiasm, the right kind of organization, and really set our goals and work with kids and get their parents involved.” As another district administrator explained, recognition for one campus serves as competition for other schools:

There may be some jealousy among or carping among the staff that don't get the rating that another school gets, but I think it's opening people's eyes to the fact that hey, it's not just the middle class, upper middle class kids who can achieve well.

Suchman (1995) further substantiates such strength in exemplars,

In particular, groups of organizations may exert major pressures on the normative order by joining together to actively proselytize for a morality in which their outputs, procedures, structures, and personnel occupy positions of honor and respect (cf. Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Suchman, 1993). Over time, such collective evangelism helps to build a winning coalition of believers, whose conceptions of socially desirable activity set the terms for subsequent moral debate, (p. 592)

As this evidence suggests, a ripple effect exists when districts and schools are successful with all students and seek ways to utilize the policy in ways that improve learning and teaching. Consequently, this success can also transform policy implementation and policy outcomes by evading the negative consequences often associated with accountability policies.

Next, this discussion turns to the essentials of shaping the accountability agenda, specifically the imperative to couple educational equity with excellence. As we know, problem definitions, which “are subject to debate and interpretation” (Portz, 1996, p. 371) are important in determining the nature and level of attention as well as action directed towards addressing problems. Generally, multiple definitions exist and competition among these definitions occurs, particularly as various actors become involved in the construction of the problem and resolutions—consider the previous discussion of the importance of local actors as policy mediators. Without a strategic effort, the moral debate as referred to by Suchman, could reestablish exclusionary policies and practices in the current accountability-driven environment.

### **Constructive Capacity: Shaping the Agenda**

Some critics of the current forms of educational accountability in the United States question the implementation responses of teachers, schools, and districts (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; McNeil, 2000; Valencia et. al, 2001; Waite, Boone, & McGhee, 2001). Undoubtedly, as opponents contend, examples of teaching to the test, high exemption rates, limited curricula, and de-skilling of teachers to improve visibility under the state accountability system exist (McNeil, 2000; Orfield & Wald, 2000). However, at their core, accountability systems are designed to be diagnostic and evaluative to improve teaching and learning. Thus, while these and other potential misuses of the system occur, mounting counterevidence illuminates the constructive capacity of these systems to produce and solidify equitable educational structures, policies, and norms in some places. For example, the research of Darling-Hammond (1997), Elmore (1993), Grissmer and Flanagan (1998), and Scheurich and Skrla (2001) demonstrates that



accountability systems can serve as an important medium for equity and excellence.

The convergence of attention by researchers, policy makers, and practitioners has amplified the “shared concern” for and “shared perception” of (Cobb & Elder, 1983) equity through accountability. *NCLB*, in many respects, bolsters attention to the educational equity and excellence union created by *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Although frequently referenced as a precursor to the educational excellence movement, *A Nation at Risk* accentuated “the twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling.” The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) concluded:

We cannot permit one [equity or excellence] to yield to the other either in principle or in practice. To do so would deny young people their chance to learn and live according to their aspirations and abilities. It also would lead to a generalized accommodation to mediocrity in our society on the one hand or the creation of an undemocratic elite on the other.

As Scheurich and Skrla (2001) stated, “In education, both equity and accountability are unquestionably controversial” (p. 322). However, the existence of individuals associated as either opponents or proponents ensures the visibility of the issues, political sponsorship for viable solutions, and renegotiations of problem definitions (Kingdon, 1984), requisites similar to those in Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson’s (2000) “historical moment” argument for increased equity. In fact, the debate itself invigorates and maintains the necessary attention of institutional and noninstitutional actors.

Consider Grissmer and Flanagan’s (1998) research on the success of accountability reforms and subsequent achievement gains in North Carolina and Texas, which found that... “despite changes of Governors and among legislators, the current incumbents [in North Carolina and Texas] have chosen to continue the reform agenda and to find ways to build on and improve it” (p. 11). These findings substantiate the broad commitment to this reform agenda. Cibulka and Derlin (1998), who echoed the importance of consistent attention to accountability reforms, further declared that “Perhaps the most important political question to be confronted is how to maintain political support for the policy and build the needed institutional capacity throughout the state’s school system to make success possible” (p. 514).

Building the institutional capacity for educational excellence and equity is one of the greatest contributions of the current research that demonstrates the success of districts and schools in an accountability-driven environment. To increase institutional capacity to achieve educational equity, local actors must be a substantial and authentic element in the policy development, implementation, and evaluation process. Furthermore, a strong coalition, which actively sets and influences the reform agenda, including emphasizing the interdependency of

accountability and equity, is essential to ensure the successful transformation of schools which serve all children.

### Conclusion

As illustrated in this chapter, the potential for state accountability systems to create substantive change in districts and schools nationwide lies not simply in the structure of the policy system, but within the ability of state and local actors to translate a remote set of policies into a tangible source for promoting educational equity. We must be cautious of advocating reforms (e.g. accountability systems, class and school-size policies, or financial resource allocations) as the context for improved student achievement or the isolated stimulus for transformations to equitable and excellent schooling alternatives. Relegating individual or collective agency, among institutional and noninstitutional actors, to an incidental role perpetuates the myth of a *silver bullet*—the idea that simply adopting and implementing a common policy assures similar results in other environments. Koschoreck (2001), whose research identified three systemic modifications that led to success in Aldine, Texas, reaffirms this perspective. “The mere existence of a system that calls for greater accountability is insufficient to produce the positive kinds of change that will result in more equity in schooling” (p. 289). Therefore, while accountability policies *shape* local actors, the manner in which they respond, and which options they choose to exercise, they are also *shaped by* local actors whose reaction may vary from no response to reinvention of the educational enterprise.

Accountability systems are not innocuous, neither are they the miracle nor the illusion (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; Haney, 2000). Available evidence demonstrates that they do possess at least some potential for altering what can be characterized as a “strong institutional environment” infiltrated with inequities and improving a weak “technical environment” (Scott & Meyer, 1991) by providing support to district and school leaders and teachers seeking equitable alternatives.

Critics of the research on the equity effects of accountability systems often contend that these findings are “nothing new, not replicable, rogue examples, or exaggerated.” Yet, beliefs, practices, and policies have emerged within the context of the current accountability-driven environment to expunge deficit assumptions that represent detrimental consequences. In fact, responsible, responsive leadership and teaching reinforce the beneficial elements of accountability systems and circumvent the detrimental effects often cited by opponents. Again, successful districts are places where leaders align their practices, policies, and structures with their commitment to equity for all children and use calculated processes to achieve, monitor, and evaluate equitable access and outcomes (Rorrer, 2001). Sclafani (2001) identifies this as a performance culture. As a result of changes in the technical aspects of educational organizations, some districts and schools, which to date have sustained structural

inequities and the unequal distribution of power and knowledge, are ensuring equitable access and outcomes for children in and around poverty and for children of color.

The research in this book demonstrates that much is known about the use of state accountability systems to address gaps in achievement, technical aspects of leadership and teaching, and institutionalized inequity in organizational policies and practices. Yet, there continues to be a need for research and comparative analysis to determine the organizational impact of state accountability systems upon district and school efforts, including the following: How do states, districts, and schools delineate which components of these systems best provide diagnostic, evaluative, and planning information for improving teaching and learning to achieve equity for all? How do these systems intersect with local actors and contexts to produce equitable effects? For example, are those affected by the policy included in the decision-making process? Are state accountability systems creating change through coercive, normative, regulative, or cognitive measures; how are these elements interrelated? In addition, longitudinal studies (Forsyth & Tallero, 1998; Rorrer, 2002; Trueba, 2001) are necessary to determine whether or not the observed equity effects are institutionalized and translate into social justice.

Furthermore, we must interrogate the policy and practice implications of accountability systems as we would any reform effort so that each successive policy refinement contributes to eradicating institutionalized inequity. Anderson (2001), whose cautions are highlighted in his critique of accountability research, observes “It would be ironic indeed if an equity-driven reform were to ultimately disempower the very children that school reformers claim they are attempting to empower” (p. 331). Despite the high-stakes environment educational organizations exist in today, Fuller and Johnson (2001) advise, “We should not allow our suspicion of testing programs and our distrust of state government to keep us from exploring how state accountability systems can be a powerful tool for generating greater equity and excellence in student achievement” (p. 281). For those who remain cynical, I ask, have we become so complacent with an inadequate system of public education that we are prepared to discount current efforts to disrupt inequity? Are we resolved that no good can come from a reform that, at least in part, attempts to dispense with differential educational opportunities based on archaic patterns of hierarchy and standards of inferiority?

Finally, all indicators suggest that accountability systems are a non-negotiable element of current educational reform. Consequently, it is imperative that advocates and opponents of accountability systems continue to collectively engage in research, debate, and practice that further diminish the prospects for this reform to induce inequity. Moreover, these collective efforts will be essential to ensure that a quest for educational excellence is united with educational equity for all children.

## Notes

1. Multiple definitions/characterizations of accountability systems exist. For the purpose of this discussion, accountability refers to the compilation of standards; information, reporting, and assessment systems; performance and growth indicators; and rewards and sanctions that hold both institutions and students accountable for academic performance and/or expected growth. Accountability is not limited to or used synonymously with “high-stakes” testing, which is only one indicator in a strong accountability system. This characterization contributes to the conversation about the equity effects of accountability systems in general without attempting to diminish the need to interrogate individual aspects of the systems.
2. Data from the author’s dissertation study of a large urban school district in Texas and North Carolina are included in this chapter. These data were collected and analyzed as part of a study on the role of district leaders in ensuring equitable access and opportunities for students who were low-income (Rorrer, 2001).
3. An earlier version of this chapter was presented as a response to *State Accountability Policies and Their Equity Effects: Thinking Carefully about Complex Policy Systems and Complex School Effects*, symposium presented at the 2001 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, Washington.
4. Currently the NCLB legislation stipulates that although there must be one accountability system for all LEAs and public schools within a state, school improvement provisions are applicable only to those schools receiving Title I funds. All state accountability plans, including AYP provisions, were approved on June 10, 2003.
5. Regulations issued for NCLB on December 2, 2002, require student group data to be disaggregated at the school, district, and state level when they are statistically reliable.

## References

- Anderson, G. (2001). Promoting educational equity in a period of growing social inequity: The silent contradictions of Texas reform discourse. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 320–32.
- Cahn, M. (1995). The players: Institutional and noninstitutional actors in the policy process. In S.Theodoulou & M.Cahn (Eds.). *Public policy: The essential readings*, (pp. 201–11). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Carnoy, M., Loeb, S., & Smith, T. (2001). *Do higher state test scores in Texas make for better high school outcomes?* CPRE Research Report Series RR-047. Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- Cibulka, J., & Derlin, R. (1998). Accountability policy adoption to policy sustainability: Reforms and systemic initiatives in Colorado and Maryland. *Educational and Urban Society* 30(4), 502–15.
- Cobb, R., & Elder, C. (1983). *Participation in American politics: The dynamics of agenda building*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cohen, D., & Hill, H. (2000). Instructional policy and classroom performance: The mathematics reform in California. *Teachers College Record* 102(2): 294–343.

- Cuban, L. (1990). Reforming again, again, and again. *Educational Researcher* 19, 3–23.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dutro, E., Fisk, M., Koch, R., Roop, L., & Wixson, K. (2002). When state policies meet local district contexts: standards-based professional development as a means to individual agency and collective ownership. *Teachers College Record* 104(4), 787–811.
- Education Week. (2001). *Quality Counts 2003*. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education Inc.
- Elmore, R. (1993). The role of school districts in instructional improvement. In S. Fuhrman (Ed.), *Designing coherent education policy: Improving the system* (pp. 96–124). San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Finn, C., & Kanstroroom, M. (2001). Searching for indirect evidence for the effects of statewide reforms. In D. Ravitch (Ed.), *Brookingspapers on education policy 2001* (pp. 131–79). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Forsyth, P., & Tallerico, M. (1998). Accountability and city school leadership. *Education and Urban Society* 30(4), 546–55.
- Fuller, E., & Johnson, J. (2001). Can state accountability systems drive improvements in school performance for children of color and children from low-income homes? *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 260–83.
- Fuhrman, S. (1999). *The new accountability*. CPRE Policy Briefs RB-27. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- Grissmer, D., & Flanagan, A. (1998). *Exploring rapid achievement gains in North Carolina and Texas*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel.
- . (2001). Searching for indirect evidence for the effects of statewide reforms. In D. Ravitch (Ed.), *Brookings papers on educational policy 2001* (pp. 181–230). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Haney, W. (2000). The myth of the Texas miracle in education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 8(41). Retrieved May, 2001, from <http://www.epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41/>
- Hannaway, J. (1993). Political pressure and institutional organizations: The case of school districts. *Sociology of Education* 66(July), 147–63.
- Heck, R. (2000). Examining the impact of school quality on school outcomes and improvement: A value-added approach. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 36 (4), 513–52.
- Hess, F.M. (1999). *Spinning wheels: The politics of urban school reform*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Kingdon, J. (1984). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Klein, S., Hamilton, L., McCaffrey, D., & Stecher, B. (2000). *What do test scores in Texas tell us?* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.
- Koschoreck, J.W. (2001). Accountability and educational equity in the transformation of an urban school district. *Education and Urban Society* 33, 284–305.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Macpherson, R.. (1998). Accountability in city schools: Theory and practice in urban educational administration. *Education and Urban Society* 30(4), 443–58.
- McNeil, L. (2000). Creating new inequalities: Contradictions of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81(10), 728–34.

- McNeil, L.M., & Valenzuela, A. (2001). The harmful impact of the TAAS system of testing in Texas: Beneath the accountability rhetoric. In G.Orfield and M.L.Kornhaber (Eds.), *Raising standards or raising barriers: Inequality and high-stakes testing in public education* (pp. 127–50). New York: Century Foundation.
- McRobbie, J. (1998). *Can state intervention spur academic turnaround?* San Francisco: WestEd.
- Mintrop, H., MacLellan, A., & Quintero, M. (2001). School improvement plans in schools on probation: A comparative content analysis across three accountability systems. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 37(2), 197–218.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2002). *Overview of public elementary and secondary schools and districts: 2000–01*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education. Retrieved November 2002, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/overview/index.asp>
- The National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Retrieved August 1999, from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/>
- Ogawa, R., Crowson, R., & Goldring, E. (1999). Enduring dilemmas of school organization. In J.Murphy & K.S.Louis (Eds.), *The handbook of research on educational administration* (pp. 277–96). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Orson, L. (2002). States strive toward ESEA compliance. *Education Week* 22(15), 1–19.
- Orfield, G., & Wald, J. (2000). The high-stakes testing mania hurts poor and minority students the most: Testing, Testing. *The Nation* 270(22), 38–40.
- Pauken, P., Kallio, B., & Stockard, R. (2001). The ethics of public school fiscal and academic accountability legislation: A multidimensional analysis. *Journal of School Leadership* 11, 162–81.
- Portz, J. (1996). Problem definitions and policy agendas: Shaping the educational agenda in Boston. *Policy Studies Journal* 24(3), 371–86.
- Ragland, M., Asera, R., & Johnson, J. (1999). *Urgency, responsibility, and efficacy: Preliminary findings of a study of high-performing Texas school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A.Dana Center.
- Riley, R. (1998). *The challenge for America: A high quality teacher in every classroom: Annual back to school address National Press Club*. Retrieved June, 2002, from <http://www.ed.gov/inits/TIMSS/980223-r.html>
- Rorrer, A. (2001). *Leadership and equity: From reproduction to reconstruction. An institutional analysis*. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2001). (UMI No. 3049260).
- . (2002). Educational leadership and institutional capacity for equity. *UCEA Review* 43(3), 1–5.
- Rowan, B., & Miskel, C. (1999). Institutional theory and the study of educational organizations. In J.Murphy & K.S.Louis (Eds.), *The handbook of research on educational administration* (pp. 359–84). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Scheurich, J.J., & Skrla, L. (2001). Continuing the conversation on equity and accountability: Listening appreciatively, responding responsibly. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83(4), 322–26.
- Scheurich, J.J., Skrla, L., & Johnson, J. (2000). Thinking carefully about equity and accountability. *Phi Delta Kappan* 82(4), 293–99.
- Sclafani, S. (2001). Using an aligned system to make real progress for Texas students. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 305–12.

- Scott, W.R., & Meyer, J. (1991). The organization of societal sectors: Propositions and early evidence. In P.DiMaggio & W.Powell (Eds.). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 108–42). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J.J. (2001). Displacing deficit thinking in school district leadership. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 235–59.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.R. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement-focused school districts*. Austin, TX: Charles A.Dana Center.
- Spillane, J. (2002). Local theories of teacher change: The pedagogy of district policies and programs. *Teachers College Record* 104(3), 377–420.
- Stapleman, J. (2000). *Standards-based accountability systems*. Denver, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (MCREL). Retrieved May 2002, from <http://www.mcrel.org/products/standards/account.html>
- Suchman, M. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *The Academy of Management Review* 20(3), 571–610.
- Texas Education Agency (TEA). (2002). *Accountability manual: The 2002 accountability rating system for Texas public schools and school districts*. Austin, TX: Author.
- Trueba, H. (2001). Conclusion: Polar positions on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS): Pragmatism and the politics of neglect. *Education and Urban Society* 33(3), 333–44.
- United States Department of Education (USDE). (2001). *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act as reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- United States Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics. (2000). *The condition of education 2000*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Valencia, R., Valenzuela, A., Sloan, K., & Foley, D. (2001). Let's treat the cause, not the symptoms: Equity and accountability in Texas revisited. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83(4), 318–21.
- Waite, D., Boone, M., & McGhee, M. (2001). A critical sociocultural view of accountability. *Journal of School Leadership* 11,182–203.
- Zucker, L. (1988). *Institutional patterns and organizations: Culture and environment*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.

# CHAPTER 19

## Accountability for Special Education Students

### *Beginning Quality Education*

ANTOINETTE F. RIESTER-WOOD

Texas has been measuring student academic achievement for the past 16 years. Over time, these measures have been upgraded, extended and refined, and now students from the early elementary grades through high school are tested in reading, math, writing, science, and social studies. Simultaneously, the minimum passing rates on these exams for school-and district-accountability requirements have risen steadily, evidencing increasingly high expectations for students in Texas public schools. Special-education students, however, were not included in the state accountability system until the year 2000. Thus, until recently, Texas has had high expectations for only *some* students.

#### **A Backwards Glance**

Linda Skrla and James Joseph Scheurich, in collaboration with their colleagues, carefully make the argument in several chapters of this book (using Texas as an example) that accountability systems can play a key role in closing the achievement gap that has historically existed between the academic performance of White and middle-class children and that of children of color and children from low-income homes. As a currently practicing special-education administrator, I agree with this premise— assuming that *all students* are included in some type of appropriate accountability measure.

This emphasis on including all students in the accountability net is a critically important factor when considering the promise of accountability for increasing education equity because economically disadvantaged students, the majority of whom are racial or ethnic minorities, are over-represented in special-education programs nationwide and, thus, are often excluded from accountability measures. This has been documented for the past 34 years, since Lloyd Dunn's (1968) dramatic article analyzing the pitfalls of special education programs. This documented trend has continued (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987) with little change in the "burgeoning" enrollment of poor, racial minority students in special education programs. There also has been little improvement in the separated nature of instructional settings for these students and little improvement in instructional programs that might allow the students to eventually exit special education. The over-identification, separate



programming, and lack of progress combined with no mandates (until recently) for measuring or accounting for academic progress serves to marginalize this group of students. The low quality of special-education programs and the way in which special education has been positioned within the state and local school systems has often lead to a substandard education for the very students who are most in need of a quality education.

Though the model described continues to dominate U.S. schooling, there are some schools in existence—several of them in Texas—that challenge the traditional system currently in place that keeps minority children, children from low-income homes, and special-education students on the bottom of the achievement curve. These schools far exceed traditional expectations for students who have historically and consistently failed to succeed academically, and they have made significant progress toward creating within their walls conditions that promote equitable schooling for all of their students, regardless of labels or differences. As a practitioner as well as a researcher, I believe that the state accountability system has been one of several crucial factors leading to their success.

### **A Glimpse at Research Demonstrating Progress in Texas**

Using disaggregated data from the state of Texas since 1992 (the point at which this data was accumulated and made available to the public) it is possible to analyze the academic performance of subgroups (African-American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged students and, later, special-education students). Access to this kind of data facilitates the identification of schools demonstrating success overall and success with particular groups of students.

With this in mind, a fellow practitioner researcher, Victoria Pursch, and I used state accountability data to select six Texas public elementary schools serving highly diverse student populations located in the Education Service Center (ESC), Region 20 area (the area surrounding the city of San Antonio) for a qualitative study based on the campuses' high rates of early literacy and low placement rates in special education programs. The selection criteria were based on the following:

1. At least 70% of students came from low-income homes (students who were eligible for federal free or reduced-lunch-price assistance);
2. The schools achieved recognized or exemplary status in the state accountability system during the 1998–1999 academic year. (To earn a Recognized rating in the Texas system, at least 80% of all students, as well as 80% of African-American, Hispanic, White and low-income students must pass each section [reading, writing and mathematics] of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills [TAAS] and meet additional attendance standards. To be rated Exemplary, schools must have a 90% pass rate for all groups in all subjects tested on TAAS and meet attendance standards).

Though writing and mathematics performance are included in determining Recognized or Exemplary ratings, and these areas were not part of our focus, using campus ratings allowed us to identify all schools in the designated area that had at least 80% and 90%, respectively, passing rates on the reading portion of TAAS; and

3. Special-education identification rates were below the regional average of 14.2%, and passing rates on the TAAS reading test for non-exempt special-education students exceeded the regional average for similar students (59.8%).

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

In successful schools such as those selected for our study, researchers, beginning with Edmonds (1986), have consistently found that the leadership of the school principal is a critical factor in the schools' success. In other words, the principal's leadership is paramount in creating the conditions for success in schools that predominantly serve children from low-income homes (Riehl, 2000). Thus, the focus for this study was leadership practices that lead to success with all students—especially special-education students.

Data collection and analysis for the study were conducted collaboratively by two practitioner researchers. Three to four site visits to the six campuses were made in spring and fall 2000. Data was obtained primarily through the use of open-ended questions asked during semi-structured interviews with the campus principals (Merriam, 1998). However, what usually began as question-and-answer exchanges between the campus principals and the researchers eventually moved into a professional and sometimes personal dialogue. All interviews were tape-recorded with permission and transcribed. Successive interviews with each principal were refined and focused based on preliminary findings that emerged from analysis of the data from earlier interviews and through continual discussions between co-researchers. Additional data was gathered during unobtrusive observations on the six campuses and through review of campus- and district-generated documents (such as campus improvement plans, schedules and staff development requests, topics and evaluations) suggested by the principals. Both researchers also kept reflexive journals throughout the project.

An inductive data analysis was used to code and categorize like units (Glesne, 1999). We examined data from interviews and field notes on an ongoing basis. We analyzed transcribed data first as individuals and then together, each time incorporating previous data and information. Verification of findings was conducted through joint examination of the transcripts, field notes, and feedback discussions with participants. Credibility was also built through many reflective conversations between the two researchers and through peer debriefing sessions with other researchers and practicing public school leaders and educators.

### *Findings*

The results from this research indicated three major points critical to the academic success these schools demonstrated. First, the principals interviewed attributed their schools' success to a multitude of approaches resulting from a shared commitment to educate all children. This collective mindset and the resulting behaviors evolved into a culture of successful learning. In other words, many of the specific programs and practices in place in these successful schools were the same (at least on the surface) as programs and practices in place in schools that have limited, or little, success in educating children from low-income homes. The programs and practices in these schools however, exist in a culture that is permeated by a set of shared beliefs about the possibility of, and responsibility for, educating all children to high levels. One of the principals interviewed referred to this mindset as an "attitude" described in the following quote:

These kids are going to get it [a concept], regardless of what it is; it may not be as quickly as everybody else, but they are going to get it...every one of them is here to be educated and that's what they are going to be when they leave.

Similarly, another principal stated the following:

A lot of what we do has to do with the actual belief that it is going to happen here. I mean, *it-is-going-to-happen-in-this-building*; if it doesn't happen here, you can't expect for it to happen anywhere else. You have to truly, truly believe that our charge is to teach every single child in this building. You know, you have these little statements that "all children can learn," and we believe that, but even more so, we believe that *every child will learn in this building*.

These quotes evidenced a philosophy of commitment to understand, recognize, and reach all students, regardless of skill level, ability, disability, or background. This philosophy enabled and empowered the educators in these schools to move beyond the deficit-thinking model that is so prevalent in the current system (Valencia, 1997). In addition, this philosophy incidentally addressed one of the major gaps in the current education system whereby only those qualifying for special assistance are able to access it, regardless of need. Rather, the philosophy in the campuses we studied was one that recognized that all students have different strengths and paces at which they learn. With this commitment to success came the acceptance, challenge, and rewards of educating diversity, not the typical practice of sorting students by skill or ability level and then abdicating responsibility for educating only some groups of students.

The second crucial finding was the immediate and prescriptive use of data from multiple sources, especially individual data generated by the state accountability measures. Data from the multiple sources (on-going benchmarking, informal assessment, and historical data including past state assessment performance records), were consistently reported to be used for matching student weakness to teacher strength and for providing each student with on-going, capacity-building instruction—a sharp contrast to more traditional uses of accountability data such as obtaining scores to determine what knowledge a student possesses. The resulting placement decisions at our study schools, then, were skill-based, thoughtful, and prescriptive, rather than random assignments to regular education or special-education teachers who perhaps happened to have the lowest number of students, as is traditionally done. With this type of prescriptive placement, all students (regardless of label) gained the academic support that specifically targeted their areas of weakness.

Furthermore, the data gathering and analyzing process was used as a tool to monitor teaching effectiveness. Thus, it served a multitude of purposes. This crucial information highlighted specific areas of student academic weakness and progress, it provided teachers with feedback on their respective teaching effectiveness, and, lastly, it combined with a strong campus commitment to educate all students to locate the responsibility for student academic growth with all educators (not special educators versus regular educators). One principal stated the following, “Data is one of the most powerful pieces that a school can have, but assessing and reporting data is not enough.... You’ve got to know how to apply it to your instruction.” The proactive approach to data use described circumvented the enormous amount of time that is traditionally spent in special-education classrooms teaching and then re-teaching concepts in a truncated fashion. The way in which these six schools structured curricular and instructional support for students having difficulty with a skill or content area pushed for more in-depth understanding with a wider span of content.

It should also be noted that these schools demonstrated promising results with special-education students 2 to 3 years before the state of Texas required and aggregated the data of special-education students into a school’s overall accountability rating. These schools were also very progressive and inclusive with regard to programming.

The third and last crucial finding from our study was what we characterized as a stubborn persistence in the quest to educate every child. These schools did not wait until a child failed to provide assistance. Nor did they pass off failure as a student problem, or routinely blame it on a disability. Importantly, neither did they give up when initial (or second or third or fourth or fifth) attempts failed. For example, several of the study principals described instances in which teachers came to them with data and detailed the hard work that had been done up to that point with children who were continuing to struggle academically. Instead of wanting to give up, however, or turning the students over to a special-education process, the teachers requested support and flexibility to provide extra

time to work with these students. It was from this process that after-school and Saturday-morning literacy programs were developed. It should be noted that every school in this study has some type of after-school tutoring program that *any student* could access.

Thus, the principals' and teachers' personal and professional investment in the success of literally all their students was demonstrated by their collective commitment, deliberate use of data, and stubborn persistence exhibited in "finding the right mix," as one principal stated. Finding the right mix was a combination of several practices decided upon by the teams of teachers. Some of the practices described included matching students' weaknesses to teachers' strengths, team teaching, cross-grade grouping, cross-classroom grouping, and aligning skills throughout the curriculum and school day. Teachers on these campuses had the freedom to craft their practice, to group students according to their strengths and talents without relying on traditional tracking mechanisms such as special education, and to persist in instruction outside the traditional school day and year. This had profound implications for students who demonstrated academic difficulty. One principal characterized this persistence in finding the right mix this way:

Everyone has triple duties around here, no one has one job, and we all do 5– 6–7 things around here. We mingle the kids up amongst a lot of different people, and I know there is research that says that is not good for kids, but we have found it to be phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal. The quality of teaching is so much better, and they [the teachers] work together to push each other to excel and push the kids to excel; it's an amazing process!

Similarly, another principal stated:

You will hear people say on this campus that they have a role to play that is defined by their job description, but they have a greater responsibility to what happens school-wide and we have to be in both realms. We have to function within our own assignment and we have to take on all of the other pieces because we've learned over time that is the way we are most effective, by being a support for others.... We are responsible for everyone's children, and we are responsible for each other's learning.

Thus, it became clear that, on these campuses, novice and experienced teachers from all disciplines worked in tandem, and they pushed each other to continually invent and reinvent their practice to meet the diverse needs of all the students—even and especially those who might be in need of what, on more traditionally structured campuses, would be labeled "special" education.

### Conclusions: A Glimmer of Hope

With the unique combination of a leadership commitment to educate all students, critical use of data, and a stubborn persistence in “finding the right mix,” the six schools in our study evolved into learning communities characterized by “collective accountability” for all students. Sadly, this type of collective accountability is typically absent in the traditional school organization whereby students and accountability for their academic progress are often most sorted by gifted, deficit, and non-deficit status. Moreover, within the culture of persistence on the study campuses, student needs were not judged. Students’ academic progress, or lack thereof, was considered feedback for teachers, important information that was used to creatively gauge and guide their teaching methods and strategies. Thus, an equitable education was not an issue subject to debate or discussion, it was a right guaranteed to all students, regardless of ability or label.

Too often, educators in traditional schools give up or blame the student or their perceived deficit when academic difficulty is experienced. Additionally, when students are thought of as “unable” or labeled disabled, the level of expectation is adjusted or “watered down” to accommodate their perceived problem. Careful attention is paid not to “penalize” the student for their perceived deficit, often resulting in teachers avoiding the skill or area needing the most work. On the six campuses studied, student difficulty, disability, or failure did not mean the skill should be avoided or excluded, it meant work must be done to meet the challenge. All school staff was responsible and accountable for student progress in order to provide an equitable and excellent education. The following principal’s statement eloquently describes this commitment to excellence:

We are evolving...our goal is to go to that unlimited achievement level; to open those lifelong learners, provide experiences, not just here and there but as a vital part of our instructional program.... Excellence doesn’t happen by accident, excellence happens by design.

As this principal made clear, the extraordinary success with literally all students, including special education students, on these campuses was planned. As was also clear from the study results, accountability played a key role in these campuses’ plans. This was demonstrated by the fact that accountability for the academic success of special-education students in these schools began before it was mandated by the state. This practice, in addition to the practices described previously, demonstrates these schools’ commitment to their students’ academic progress. It should be emphasized, however, that the schools’ goals were focused on high levels of learning for all students—not on any particular accountability measure or rating. Although the data provided by state accountability systems, such as the one in use in Texas, are useful and critical to academic progress, they should be viewed as a crucial beginning point, not as a final destination.

## References

- Dunn, L. (1968). Special education for the mildly retarded: Is much of it justifiable? *Exceptional Children* 35(1), 5–22.
- Edmonds, R.R. (1986). Characteristics of effective schools. In U. Neisser (Ed.) *The school achievement of minority children: New perspectives* (pp. 93–104). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. (1994). Inclusive schools movement and the radicalization of special education reform. *Exceptional Children* 60(4), 294–309.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Boston: Addison-Wesley.
- Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Reynolds, M., Wang, M., & Walberg, H. (1987). The necessary restructuring of special and regular education. *Exceptional Children* 53(5), 391–98.
- Riehl, C.J. (2000). The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: A review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research* 70(1), 55–81.
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. London: Falmer.

# CHAPTER 20

## Conclusion: Keeping Equity in the Foreground

LINDA SKRLA AND JAMES JOSEPH SCHEURICH

*At the heart of states' push to raise academic standards is the strong belief that, as a democracy and as an economy, the nation can ill afford to continue to have high expectations for only a chosen few children. It is both practical and desirable for schools to move away from a bell-curve approach that requires only some to reach success.*

(Achieve, Inc., 2002a, p. 13)

In this book, we—along with colleagues and critics representing a range of political, paradigmatic, epistemological, and philosophical viewpoints— have engaged in substantive and significant dialogue about educational equity and accountability in U.S. public schools. We framed the current state of the equity-and-accountability discussion in [part 1](#); debated the evidence of accountability's utility in leveraging equity in [part 2](#); examined research-based evidence of accountability's productive effects in school districts and in one state in [part 3](#); and heard critique, caution, and optimism expressed by a range of commentators in [part 4](#).

In this concluding chapter, we turn now to the future of educational equity and accountability policy in U.S. public education. We have identified three major arenas that we see as central ones to be considered in the immediate future by all of us engaged in the work of advancing educational equity. The first of these arenas is implementation and refinement of policy. The second is foregrounding equity in policy development and debate. The third is replicating and disseminating successful practices. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

### Implementing and Refining Policy

One of the key challenges, thus far, in research about and evaluation of the effectiveness of U.S. accountability policy, particularly its effectiveness in increasing education equity and in addressing some of the historic inequities in U.S. schooling, has been the enormous variation in the design and



implementation of accountability policy in the 50 states and the dynamism of these systems, as has been discussed in several of the chapters in this book. As Cohen and Hill (2001) emphasized:

Policies that aim to improve teaching and learning depend on complex chains of causation.... Policy research that fails to make such distinctions [among extensive variations in types of implementation] can quite seriously mislead everyone about the nature and effects of policy, (pp. 8, 11)

Though this complexity and the dynamic nature of states' policy systems will doubtless continue to challenge researchers and policy analysts in the future, the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)* in January, 2002, has already had and will continue to place enormous standardizing pressure on accountability systems nationwide. As states, school districts, campuses, and classrooms struggle to come into compliance with *NCLB's* requirements (i.e., standards-based assessments, disaggregation of data, certifying "highly qualified" teachers, adequate yearly progress [AYP], public reporting of performance, and so forth), greater similarity among systems than has been evident in the past will undoubtedly result.

Simply because these policies and their implementations are likely to become more standardized than they have been in the past, however, does not necessarily mean that the policies are good or effective ones, especially with respect to their potential impact on equity. *NCLB's* provisions have already come under considerable criticism as being ill-conceived, "dangerously arbitrary[,] and inflexible" (Fletcher, 2003, g2). Even provisions of the act that are based on policies that have proven successful in individual states face uncertain implementation and have the potential for significant unintended negative consequences as they are replicated on a national basis.

For example, the requirement that student performance data from standardized tests be publicly reported by disaggregated groups based on race and family income status is a policy mandate for which the possibility of misguided implementation is high. As was argued in several chapters of this book, in the Texas case, disaggregated data had powerfully positive effects in assisting efforts to raise student achievement for all groups and educators (Achieve, Inc., 2002b). This positive effect, however was by no means universal and, especially in the early years of implementation of the Texas system, there were several highly publicized incidents in which school administrators made highly inappropriate responses to local achievement gaps by blaming children of color for these gaps (see Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000; see, also, McKenzie, [chapter 17](#), this volume).

This "blaming the victim" type of response to disaggregated data is one of the largest concerns that some of accountability's critics have—that is, that administrators, policy makers, legislators, and others in positions of power will

use test results that show children of color and children from low-income homes to be performing at low levels to justify even more negative, remedial, and punitive treatment for these same children than they have received in the past. Certainly, the horrendous history of standardized testing in the United States would justify such fears (see Valencia, 1997). Thus, as *NCLB*'s disaggregation provisions take effect, all of us concerned about educational equity need to remain vigilant for these negative consequences and, in response, need to publicly deplore them when and where they occur. If we do not deplore “blame the victim” excuses, the fact that many of the “causes” of the achievement gap are internal to school systems (such as under-assignment of children of color to higher track classes and over-assignment of the same children to discipline) will continue to be ignored, as will the fact that the educators in many schools and districts have explicitly taken responsibility for the achievement gaps and have successfully removed or reduced them.

A second example of a policy implementation and refinement issue central to the struggle for educational equity that is one that Larry Parker mentioned in his commentary piece ([chapter 13](#))—that is, White backlash as accountability provisions intended to promote equity become perceived as infringing on privileged children's property rights to a superior education. Anti-testing movements in several states and the emergence of organizations, such as Fairtest ([www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)), may, in part, be evidence of this type of backlash. We have certainly seen some of this in Texas districts, as even some district school board members express dissatisfaction with district equity efforts. Additionally, this sort of backlash may grow stronger as the main provisions of *NCLB* come into force. For example,

State education officials are warning that a new federal education law's requirement that each racial and demographic subgroup in a school show annual improvement on standardized tests will result in the majority of the nation's schools being deemed failing. The likelihood that the law would force them to label the majority of their schools “low performing”....will result in schools being treated as failures—even if they are improving by most measures.... Michael E. Ward, superintendent of schools in North Carolina and president of the Council of Chief State School Officers, [said], “A piece of legislation that we think has very worthy goals risks being undone by its own negative weight.” (Fletcher, 2003, ¶2–3)

As Ward points out, there is a real possibility that this legislation, despite its equity-oriented goal of raising achievement for all student groups, will lose support and ultimately be undone because the accountability net will catch so many schools and students with the “low-performing” label that parents, educators, and policy makers will work to reject the legislation.

A third example of a policy implementation issue that will bear close scrutiny in the future is the eroding of support for accountability from teachers and teacher groups. According to Achieve, Inc. (2002a),

While teachers generally have supported the push for higher standards, that support is beginning to waver. In the view of many teachers, states' efforts to set standards and measure results are running too far ahead of work to give teachers the curriculum they need and the professional development to use it. (p. 3)

Since the entire weight of actually improving education for children of color and children from low-income homes ultimately rests on classroom teachers, the loss of their support for accountability provisions intended to improve equity would irrevocably undermine the success of such policy in achieving equity (see chapters 16 and 17 for extended discussion of these issues).

### **Foregrounding Equity in Policy Development and Debate**

The second major arena of activity in the educational equity-accountability dynamic that we see in the future is a critical need to keep equity issues foregrounded in the debates about accountability policy specifically and educational policy generally. Two issues are of particular concern in this arena are: (1) current policy moves to establish “scientifically based research” as the only acceptable form of research and (2) the continued but mainly unacknowledged systemic nature of inequity in U.S. schooling.

The first of these areas of concern—the recent national movement to privilege particular definitions of “scientific” or “evidence based” research as the sole legitimate form of research—in the words of Bettie St. Pierre (2002), “should scare us all to death” (p. 27). For example, the *NCLB Act* contains 111 references to “scientifically based research.” Further, a recent National Research Council (NRC) report clarifies what such scientifically based research should look like—quality science is defined as one that states testable hypotheses and is objective, without bias, randomized, replicable, generalizable, and predictive (NRC, 2002, p. 82).

Such narrow definitions of research and knowledge production have, of course, come under extensive and vigorous critique over the past 50 years from scholars and philosophers in a broad range of disciplines, including many of the social sciences and education in particular (see Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Donmoyer, Imber, & Scheurich, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Tillman, 2002). Of major concern, though, for the purposes of the equity-accountability debates in U.S. educational policy circles is the fact that this type of definition of what it means to do science or to do quality research has a long history of avoiding, obscuring, and obliterating equity and social justice concerns. In other words, the kind of research supported by the NRC has a poor historical record

for challenging inequity, while much of the research that has raised inequity issues has been those types of research that the NRC does not strongly support. Thus, there is a real danger that future research about accountability policy, if limited only to research that fits the NRC's viewpoint, may result in research in which race and class are erased as major issues and concerns of equity and justice vanish, as they have in the past.

A second area in which equity concerns need to be continuously foregrounded is the systemic nature of the inequities embedded in current assumptions, structures, and practices of U.S. public education. By this we mean that the intense focus on outcome and achievement inequities (the achievement gap and test-score-gap discourse) has tended to obscure the connections between these outcome or achievement inequities and other, equally important inequities structured into the system, such as funding inequities. Civil rights activists have worked long and hard for the past several decades to move these other inequities into the foreground, but, as accountability becomes an ever-larger policy force, the need to keep these other issues at the front of the debate has never been greater.

For example, more and more research is accumulating that demonstrates the critical importance that access to quality teachers and rigorous curriculum has on students' achievement potential (i.e., Prince 2002; Moses & Cobb, 2000; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Schoenfeld, 2002). In both of these areas students of color and students from low-income homes have typically received discriminatory treatment, and in both areas equity and inequity must be identified as well as addressed in order for achievement equity to improve on a broad-scale basis (see Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, in press, for a more extensive discussion on the relationships between teacher quality, instructional programs, and achievement equity). Thus, a focus on promoting a systemic equity (as opposed to outcome or achievement equity only) is critical as we move into the next phase of accountability policy in U.S. schooling. Scott (2001) provided a useful definition of what such systemic equity would look like:

Systemic equity is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner—in whatever learning environment that learner is found—has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life. (¶6)

Consequently, as accountability policy and educational equity discussions move forward in the future, a focus on systemic equity as Scott describes it is essential in order to progress toward educational equity for children of color and children from low-income homes.

### Refining and Disseminating Successful Practices

Kofi Lomotey argued in 1990 that “One cannot identify a particular region of the country, a state, a city, or a school district that has been successful for any period of time in educating the majority of African Americans in their charge” (p. 2). A dozen years after his statement, one could argue that this is no longer true. Though without a doubt the under-education of African American children and other children of color in the United States is still an enormous problem, there *are* now schools and districts in existence that have nearly decade-long track records of demonstrable success in educating these same students. Certainly, this success is not perfect success, and certainly, there is still room for large improvements even in these exemplar schools and districts. But, for the first time in U.S. history, we now have schools and entire school districts in which large numbers of children of color and children from low-income homes have gone through their entire public school careers and have *never experienced the early and perennial school failure* that heretofore would have been their almost certain fate.

As we have argued in other places in this volume, we believe certain uses of accountability policy (i.e. disaggregation of data, curriculum alignment, holding schools accountable for equitable performance for all groups, and so forth) have contributed greatly to the emergence of schools and districts such as the ones we described in discussions of our research (see, particularly, chapters 9 and 11). These districts are not found only in Texas, either. Other researchers have documented similar large-scale improvements in educational outcomes for children of color and children from low-income homes in states around the country (see Cawelti, 2001; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Rorrer, 2002).

The point we are making here, then, is that the existence of these schools and districts carries with it a weighty obligation to *do something* about disseminating and replicating this type of success so that the daily destructiveness that is still the norm for the overwhelming majority of children of color and children from low-income families stops. Perhaps one of the most discouraging parts of the equity-and-accountability debates in which we have been engaged over the past several years has been having the hardwon success of many, many children, teachers, school leaders, and communities diminished or dismissed because their success was somehow philosophically tainted by its having been associated with accountability. It is simply a fact that there is too much good research and data showing that in some districts and schools, accountability has been a major driver of improved teaching and learning for children of color and children from low-income families for anyone to deny.

We have to do better than this. As Hanushek and Raymond (2002) put it, “It is important that the discussion moves past ‘whether accountability systems are perfect or not’” (p. 2). We would put it even more forcefully and say that one-sided, simplistic, reductive conclusions about accountability and equity are irresponsible. Virtually no issue in education, from the best practices in reading

to state accountability tests, is simple or can be wholly understood from one viewpoint, given the multiple levels and sites and the large numbers of students, educators, parents, policy makers, and community members involved with public education (Glickman, 2001). Thus, it is critically important that we move past arguing over whether accountability per se is successful—the evidence is already there; accountability is complex; primarily successful in some contexts and primarily not in others. In contrast, what is most needed, what will most powerfully move all of public education forward is to identify where success with improving equity is occurring, what is the nature of that success (research), and how to spread this success to other schools and districts.

However, make no mistake, we are not arguing that we should not continue to critique, question, dialogue, struggle *respectfully* with one another over equity and accountability. We unquestionably have an obligation to do so. But we should not become so mired in scholar-oriented, philosophical, epistemological, or political debates, in proving our side is right and the others are wrong, that we lose sight of the critically important work of improving the day-to-day schooling experiences of the 17 million children of color in U.S. schools (NCES, 2000). It is very, very easy for those of us in education at any level who live relatively easy lives, economically and socially, to become so attached to our egos, so attached to our politics or philosophy (no matter how radical or respected), that we forget that the spirits of children of color and children from low-income homes are being daily broken in public schools by educators who do not believe in them as wonderful, intelligent young people; do not respect them, their parents and families, their languages, and their cultures; and do not care enough to learn how to be successful with ALL of the children sitting in their classrooms. It is a simple truth: one-sided, simplistic, reductive views on any issue in public education, let alone, on equity and accountability, serve no child well.

### Final Thoughts

Ronald Edmonds (1979) said long ago that educating all children well was not a matter of couldn't, but a matter of wouldn't. We would say the same about educational equity and accountability. Regardless of where any of us is politically, philosophically, or epistemologically on these issues, we have come too far down the accountability road and have seen too many changes to go back to the old public education status quo, either the old racism of segregated and unequal or the new racism of integrated and unequal. This is what Achieve, Inc. (2002a) described as the deceitful façade of commonality in the U.S. schooling experience:

These common trappings of schools have served as a façade, hiding what historically have been wildly different expectations about the academic achievement of children in different schools. Expectations have varied from community to community and, not surprisingly, so has achievement.

Students from poorer communities and disadvantaged backgrounds consistently have ended up with less when it comes to both expectations and achievement. The good news is the façade is beginning to be torn down. One by one, states have worked over the last decade to set standards for all students. Many have created tests to measure achievement against those standards and have begun to hold schools and students accountable for the results. While more undoubtedly remains to be done, much has occurred, (p. 2)

We would concur. Much has been accomplished, in part, in our view, through accountability policy, in making progress toward educational equity in some schools, in some districts, and in some states. Much, much more remains to be done if we are ever to see the dream of equity realized in our public schools. But this is what we must do. Education is, as Robert Moses (a highly respected Mississippi civil rights activist) has argued, the front line of today's civil rights struggles (see Moses and Cobb, 2002). Inequity inarguably remains the largest, most important problem in U.S. public education, and it our responsibility, our duty, to solve it. ALL of the school children are *OUR children*.

### References

- Achieve, Inc. (2002a). *Staying on course: Standards-based reform in Americas schools: Progress and prospects*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- . (2002b). *Three paths one destination: Standards-based reform in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Texas*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Cawelti, G. (2001). Six districts: One goal of excellence. *Journal of Staff Development*-22 (4), 30–35.
- Darling-Hammond, L, & Youngs, P. (2002). Denning “high qualified teachers”: What does “scientifically based research” actually tell us? *Educational Researcher* 31(9), 13–25.
- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2000). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N.K.Denzin, & Y.S.Lincoln, (Eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks,CA: Sage.
- Donmoyer, R., Imber, M., & Scheurich, J.J. (1995). *The knowledge base in educational administration: Multiple perspectives*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Edmonds, R.R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership* 37 (1), 15–18, 20–24.
- Elmore, R. F. & Burney, D. (1997). *Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community School District #2, New York City* (Report for the National Commission on Teaching and Learning). Klutztown, PA: Klutztown.
- Fletcher, M.A. (2003, Jan. 2). States worry new law sets schools up to fail. *Washington Post*. Retrieved January 2, 2003, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A64246-2003Jan1.html>

- Glickman, C.D. (2001). Dichotomizing education: Why no one wins and America loses. *Phi Delta Kappan* 83(2), 147–52.
- Hanushek, E.A., & Raymond, M.E. (2002, June). Lessons about the design of state accountability systems. Paper presented at the Taking Account of Accountability conference, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Retrieved from <http://edpro.stanford.edu/eah/papers/accountability>. Harvard.publication%20version.pdf
- Lomotey, K. (1990). Introduction. In K.Lomotey (Ed.). *Going to School: The African-American experience* (pp. 1–9). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Moses, R. J, & Cobb, Jr., C.E. (2002). *Radical equations: Math literacy and civil rights*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2000). *Public school student, staff and graduate counts by state, school year 1998–99* [On-line]. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000330>
- National Research Council (NRC). (2002). *Scientific research in education*. R.J.Shavelson & L.Towne (Eds.). Committee on Scientific Principles for Education Research. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Prince, C.D. (2002). *The challenge of attracting good teachers and principals to struggling schools*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.
- Rorrer, A.K. (2002). Educational leadership and institutional capacity for equity. *UCEA Review*, XLIII(3), 1–5.
- Sanders, W.L., & Rivers, J.C. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center.
- Schoenfeld, A.H. (2002). Making mathematics work for all children: Issues of standards, testing, and equity. *Educational Researcher* 3(1), 13–25.
- Scott, B. (2001, March). Coming of age. *IDRA Newsletter* [On-line]. Available: <http://www.idra.org/Newsletters/2001/Mar/Bradley.htm>
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., & Johnson, J.F. (2000). *Equity-driven, achievement focused school districts: A report on systemic school success in four Texas school districts serving diverse student populations*. Austin, TX: The Charles A.Dana Center.
- Skrla, L., Scheurich, J.J., Garcia, J., & Nolly, G. (in press). Equity audits: A practical leadership tool for developing equitable and excellent schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*.
- St. Pierre, E.A. (2002). “Science” rejects postmodernism. *Educational Researcher* 31(8), 25–27.
- Tillman, L.C. (2002). Culturally sensitive research approaches: An African American perspective. *Educational Researcher* 31(9), 3–12.
- Valencia, R.R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking*. London: Falmer.





# Contributors

**Gary L.Anderson** is a professor in the Department of Education at the University of California, Irvine. His research interests include critical theory, action research, democratic leadership, and Latin American education.

**William R.Black** is a doctoral student in the Educational Administration department at the University of Texas at Austin. He is managing editor for the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.

**Douglas Foley** is a graduate of Northern Iowa University and Stanford University. He has been on the University of Texas faculty since 1970. He holds a joint appointment in the Departments of Curriculum and Instruction and in Anthropology. His specialties are ethnic and race relations, minority education, and American popular culture. He has published over 30 articles in journals and books.

**Edward J.Fuller** is a researcher for the Texas State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC). He is a former high school mathematics teacher; he has a masters degree in educational administration and a Ph.D. in educational policy from the University of Texas at Austin.

**Walter Haney**, Professor of Education at Boston College and Senior Research Associate in the Center for the Study of Testing Evaluation and Educational Policy (CSTEPEP), specializes in educational evaluation and assessment and educational technology. He has published widely on testing and assessment issues in scholarly journals such as the *Harvard Educational Review*, *Review of Educational Research*, and *Review of Research in Education* and in wide-audience periodicals such as *Educational Leadership*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *Washington Post*.

**Joseph F.Johnson, Jr.** is Special Assistant to the Ohio Superintendent of Public Instruction. His former positions include Director of Compensatory Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education and Director of District Support and Services at the Charles A.Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin. His research has centered on the study of schools and school districts that achieved impressive results for children of color and children from low-income homes.

**Stephen Klein** is a Senior Research Scientist with the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, CA. His areas of specialization include design, testing, professional licensing examinations, and program evaluation.

**James W. Koschoreck** is currently an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati. His research interests include educational policy, accountability and equity, and issues of diversity and sexuality in the public schools. He has recently published in the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* and in *Educational Administration Quarterly*.

**Kathryn Bell McKenzie** is an assistant professor in the Educational Administration and Human Resource Development department at Texas A&M University. She was previously assistant director of the Austin, Texas, Independent School District School Leadership Academy. She has also been a teacher and campus principal.

**Laurence Parker** is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His scholarly work covers issues related to school choice and urban minority families, higher education desegregation, and critical race theory and education. His recent publications include an article on critical race theory and higher education desegregation in the *Journal of Education Finance*, and an article on race and discipline in schools from the African-American perspective in the *Journal of Special Education*.

**Antoinette F. Riester-Wood** is a special education program coordinator for the North East Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas, and an adjunct faculty member for Trinity University in the education and school psychology departments. She is a former school psychologist and special-education teacher. Her experience had been in large urban and small rural school districts in Texas. She recently had an article published in the *Journal of School Leadership*.

**Andrea K. Rorrer** is assistant professor in the Educational Leadership and Policy department at the University of Utah. A former teacher and administrator in public schools, her research interests focus on institutional theory and social justice. She was the 2002 recipient of the AERA Division A Dissertation of the Year award, and her work has appeared in the *Journal of Educational Policy* and the *UCEA Review*.

**James Joseph Scheurich** is an associate professor in Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin. He is Director of the Public School Executive Leadership Program. He is the Co-Editor of the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education and author of the books *Research Method in the Postmodern* and *Anti-Racist Scholarship*.

**Susan Sclafani** is Counselor to U.S. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige. She was formerly Chief of Staff for Houston, Texas, Independent School District.

**Linda Skrla** is an associate professor in the Educational Administration and Human Resource Development department at Texas A&M University. She is a former Texas public school teacher, campus administrator, and central office administrator. Her research focuses on educational equity issues in school

leadership, including accountability, high success districts, and women superintendents. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Educational Researcher*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, and *Educational Administration Quarterly*.

**Kris Sloan** is an assistant professor in the Teaching Learning and Culture department at Texas A&M University. A former teacher in the early primary grades, his research and teaching interests include anti-oppressive curriculum and pedagogy, teacher agency, and educational policy.

**Henry T. Trueba** is the Ruben E. Hinojosa Regents Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Education at the University of Texas at Austin. He obtained his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Pittsburgh. He served as Dean of the College of Education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and he served briefly as Vice President of Academic Affairs at the University of Houston. He has written a number of books and articles on ethnic identity and resiliency, as well as on ethnographic research in school.

**Richard R. Valencia** is a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and faculty associate at the Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking* and editor of *Chicano School Failure and Success: Past, Present, and Future*.

**Angela Valenzuela** is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. A Stanford University graduate, she previously held posts teaching in Sociology at Rice University in Houston, Texas (1990–98), and as a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Houston (1998–99). Her research and teaching interests are in the sociology of education, minority youth in schools, educational policy, and urban education reform.



# Index

- accountability policy
  - assessment issues, 22–23
  - curriculum and, 20–21, 166–168, 172–173, 236–238
  - context, 157–159
  - dynamic nature of, 18–19
  - equity effects of
    - driving higher expectations, 124–126
    - English language learners, 8, 183, 211–226
    - gender and, 183
    - mixed, 2–3, 19–20
    - making inequity visible, 115–118
    - negative, 3–4, 13, 57
    - positive, 2, 16–17, 56, 146–148
    - public commitment, 31
    - reducing risk for superintendents, 118–120
    - special education students, 260–267
  - historic grounding, 29
  - historic possibilities of, 14–18, 30–32, 254
  - local actors and, 248–251
  - polarized debates on, x–1, 13, 34, 39, 98, 231
  - refinement, 269
  - system components, 20
  - teaching issues, 21–22
  - unintended consequences, 230–242
- Achieve, Inc., 4, 268, 271, 275
- ACT, 6, 139–140, 176, 178
- Adams, M., 52
- Advanced Placement (AP) examinations, 17, 56, 139, 176, 178
- Afrocentric schools, 60
- Aldine Independent School District, 7, 32, 68–68, 89, 101, 111, 151–170, 203–204, 255
- Anderson, G.L., 7, 245
- Apple, M.W., x
- Artiles, A., 40
- Austin Independent School District, 8, 89, 182
- Ball, D.L., 22
- Bell, D., 181
- benchmarks, 167
- Black, W.R., 8
- Blackmore, J., 51–52
- Bourdieu, P., 206, 237
- Brazosport Independent School District, 65–68, 111, 188
- Butchart, R., 55
- California, 19
- capacity, 253
- Cárdenas, J., 36
- Carnoy, M., 22, 100, 145
- Chicago schools, 3
- children of color
  - inequitable treatment in schools, 51–51, 98
  - children of color (*continued*)
  - public attention to educational needs of, 30
  - school system failure and, 39–40, 51–51, 231
- Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (CARE), 5, 35
- Cohen, D., 179, 249, 269

- convergence of interests, 59, 181–182  
 Cuban, L., 245
- Darling-Hammond, L., 22  
 Davies, B., 168  
 decentralization, 164  
 deficit thinking, 13, 29–30, 107–127, 235  
 deskilling principals and teachers, 238–240  
 Delpit, L., 13  
 Dennis, D., 194  
 drop-out rates, 13, 83–85, 97–99, 142–146  
 Dunn, L., 261
- Edmonds, R.R., 14, 18, 44, 54, 275  
*Education and Urban Society*, 7
- Fassold, M., 33  
 Ferguson, R., 22, 54  
 Finn, C., 247  
 Foley, D.E., 5, 38–45  
 football, 116  
 Fullan, M., 177  
 Fuller, E., 6, 24, 179–184, 186–196, 197–207, 247, 256
- Gallagher, C., 57–58  
 García, D., 226  
 Garcia, E., 40  
 Garza, E., 43  
*G.I.Forum v. Moses*, 4, 29, 83  
 Glesne, C., 263  
 Glickman, C.D., x, 274  
 Gordon, B., 3–4  
 Gordon, S., 58  
 Grinberg, J., 225  
 Grissmer, D., 4, 56, 61, 65, 99, 247, 135, 254
- habitus, 206, 237  
 Haney, W., 5, 13, 24, 96–102, 143–144  
 Hannaway, J., 249  
 Hanushek, E.A., 274  
 Hatton, S., 43  
 Herrnstein, R., 153, 181  
 hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), 19  
 Hill, H., 179, 249, 269
- Hood, S., 23, 184  
 Horn, R.A., 3  
 House, E.R., 181–182  
 Houston Independent School District, 7, 89, 173–176, 182, 183
- institutional conformity, 251  
 integrity, 162  
 Interfaith Alliance, 43
- Johnson, J.F Jr., 4, 5, 6, 27–36, 63, 79–88, 90–96, 112, 179–184, 186–196, 197–207, 247, 256  
 Johnson, L.B., 191
- Keating, P., 23  
 Kentucky, 19, 56  
 Kincheloe, J.L., 3  
 King, M.L., Jr., 14  
 Klein, S., 6, 96–102  
 Kornhaber, M., 3  
 Koschoreck, J.W., 5, 6–7, 79–88, 90–96, 179–184, 254  
 Kowalski, T.J., 161
- Ladson-Billings, G., 2, 40, 59, 238  
 League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), 57  
 legitimacy, 251  
 Lightfoot-Lawrence, S., 168–169  
 Linn, R., 4, 55  
 Lomotey, K., 54, 108, 109, 273
- McDermott, R., 107  
 McKenzie, K.B., 8, 270  
 McNeil, L., 13, 21, 188, 193, 200  
 Meier, D., 195  
 Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), 4, 57, 61, 83, 189  
 Miskel, C., 24, 116  
 Moll, L., 40  
 Mortenson, T., 33  
 Moses, R., 275  
 Muller, C., 3, 19
- Nation at Risk*, A, 186, 192, 246, 253

- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 6, 13, 33, 56, 91–95, 97, 99, 107, 134–136
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 57
- National Council of La Raza, 54
- National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), 3
- national equity norm, 15, 30
- National Research Council, 271
- Nelson, J., 81–82
- Nelson, S., 235, 239
- Newman, F., 178
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*, 1, 4, 215, 245–246, 268
- North Carolina, 8, 13, 56, 65, 109, 246, 254
- Oakes, J., 21, 107
- Ogawa, R., 189
- Olson, L., 1, 56, 248
- opportunity to learn, 41, 272
- Orfield, G., 3, 61
- outlier effect, 33–34, 44–45
- parental involvement, 42
- Parker, L., 7, 23
- Pearl, A., 36
- Petersen, G., 120
- policy archaeology, 225
- Popkewitz, T.S., x
- proactive redundancy, 189
- Puriefoy, W., 118
- Quality Counts*, 64–65, 248
- racism  
   anti-, 51–52  
   systemic, 53–55, 98, 102
- Ragland, M., 54, 58, 247
- Reading Recovery, 195
- Reading Proficiency Test in English (RPTE), 219–225
- Reese, M., 58
- Reyes, P., 40, 58, 154
- Riehl, C., 122
- Riester-Wood, A.F., 8
- Roderick, M., 3
- Rorrer, A.K., 8
- Rowan, B., 24, 116
- Rubanova, N., 33
- Ruiz de Velasco, J., 211
- Saavedra, E., 225
- San Benito Consolidated Independent School District, 32, 43, 68–68, 112
- SAT, 6, 139–140, 176, 178
- Scheurich, J.J., 27–36, 59, 79–88, 90–96, 154, 162, 179–184, 186–196, 197–207, 225, 226, 252, 253, 260
- Schiller, K.S., 3, 19
- Sclafani, S., 7, 255
- Scott, B., 272–273
- Shirley, D., 43, 195
- Shujaa, M., 60
- Skrla, L., 27–36, 79–88, 90–96, 147, 179–184, 186–196, 197–207, 252, 253, 260
- Sloan, K., 5, 38–45
- Spillane, J., 154, 249
- Steele, C.M., 181
- street level bureaucrats, x, 249
- stubborn persistence, 265
- students, villainization of, 233–236
- Subtractive Schooling*, 8, 13
- Suchman, M., 252
- superintendents, 107–127, 161
- systemic equity, 272–273
- Taylor, W.L., 2
- teams, 165–166
- testing  
   exemptions- 141–142  
   inclusion of English language learners in, 213–214
- Texas  
   accountability policy in, 4, 15, 18, 61–64, 99–100, 109, 117, 129–149, 172–173, 250  
   successful schools in, 8, 32–34, 65–71, 261–266, 230–240
- Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), 6, 17, 64–65, 81, 91–95, 97, 99, 131, 134, 181, 197–207, 216–219



- Texas Business and Education Coalition,  
15
- Thompson, C., 154
- Tillman, L., 272
- Title x, 214
- Title IX, 43–44
- Townsend, B., 40
- Trueba, H.T., 7, 71
- 
- Valencia, R.R., 5, 38–45, 107–107 249
- Valenzuela, A., 4, 5, 8, 38–45, 200, 236
- Viadero, D., 56
- Vygotsky, L.S., 206–207, 238
- 
- Wehlage, G., 178
- Whiteness, 182
- Whitty, G., 3
- Wichita Falls Independent School District,  
68–68, 112
- 
- Yzaguirre, R., 54