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Strengthening Accountability in Public Education

Introduction

The difficulty of creating accountability in public education may be illustrated by a hypothetical case, though one all too real. A student comes home with bad grades on her report card. Her parents blame the teacher for failing to teach. The teacher absolves himself of blame by criticizing the principal for giving him too many students and not providing textbooks until late in the school term. In turn, the principal blames the education ministry for inadequate staffing resources and textbook delays. The education ministry then shifts blame to the finance ministry's insufficient funding and the textbook industry's production delays. The textbook publishers respond that the education ministry didn't solicit bids with sufficient advance notice to ensure delivery by the start of school. In turn, the finance ministry cites the need to meet financial targets and charges politicians with failing to raise the taxes that would allow education spending to increase. Politicians retort that most voters prefer tax cuts to increased education spending and offer doubts about how efficiently the education ministry manages its budget.

In short, creating accountability in public education is extraordinarily complex. No single policymaker or provider is responsible for failing students. Rather, a complex web of policymakers and providers is responsible. The issue of accountability is also complicated by the difficulty in defining and measuring schooling outcomes. Extensive research suggests that about two-thirds of the variation in student achievement is the product of home environments, not schools. Hence, test scores by themselves say almost nothing about school or classroom effectiveness. Scores have to be statistically adjusted to measure a school's value-added, but this is much easier said than done (Ladd 1996).

Mapping Accountability

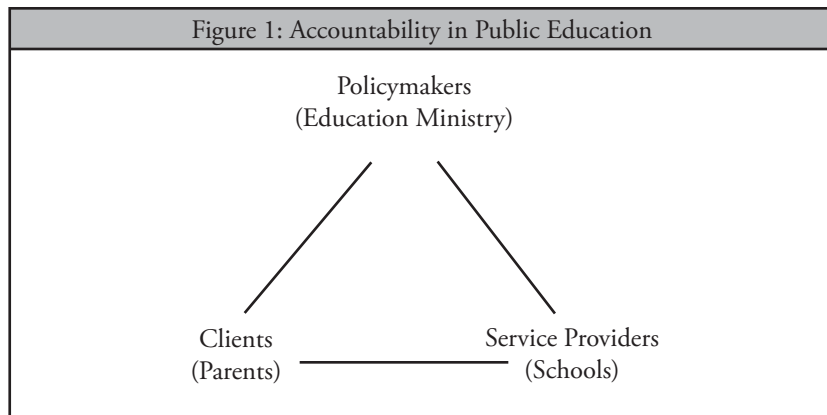
There are numerous studies of accountability, both in public services and education (Newman, King, and Rigdon 1997). This literature, synthesized in the World Bank's 2004 World Development Report, identifies three key actors: clients or customers of public services; direct service providers; and policymakers who make decisions about how much education to provide and how to organize its financing and delivery (World Bank 2003). However, this greatly simplifies educational realities.

1. *Clients.* There are two principal clients of public education. One is the direct beneficiary—students and their parents. The other is the indirect beneficiary—citizens who receive benefits from a well-educated populace and productive labor force. If there were no social benefits associated with education, schooling could be left entirely to the private sector. Because there are numerous and diverse social benefits, governments must ensure adequate financing and equitable delivery of education.
2. *Service Providers.* The frontline education service provider is the school, which includes its principal, teachers, and other resources. However, the school is supported by a large array of actors, including supervisors, teacher trainers, curriculum specialists, and assessment experts. Some are located in schools, but many are located elsewhere, including district or provincial offices.
3. *Policymakers.* Numerous actors play a role in policymaking—elected public officials; appointed public officials who head education and finance ministries; the educational bureaucracy's senior managers, who ensure policies are implemented; and actors outside

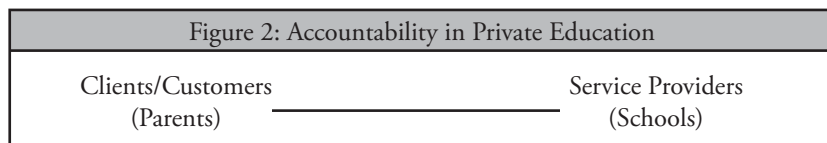


government, such as teachers’ unions and thinktanks that influence education policies. When responsibilities for financing and delivering education are split across levels of government, the web of policymakers becomes even more complex.

These three groups constitute the triad involved in education accountability. In simplistic terms, clients make their preferences known to policymakers through the ballot box. Policymakers formulate policies that reflect those preferences and command service providers to implement them. Service providers follow policies and regulations delivered from above and, with financing made available, deliver instructional services to children and their parents. Figure 1 illustrates this long route of public sector accountability.



This route, associated with traditional, centralized delivery of education in developing countries, can be contrasted with the shorter “marketplace” route of accountability for private education. As shown in Figure 2, clients directly purchase educational services from private schools. Money flows directly from clients to these service providers, who are directly accountable to their clients. The education ministry has an oversight role. Instead of expressing demands through the ballot box and using general taxes, parents express their demand by sending their children and funds directly to private schools. Instead of taking orders from policymakers, schools in the marketplace route take their orders directly from their clients or customers. Schools failing to respond to client demand and expectations are likely to find themselves out of business.



Why Is Accountability So Poor?

In traditional public education, accountability is weak, especially in most developing countries because of:

- weak voice;
- poor management;
- insufficient information;
- confusing roles; and
- weak incentives (PREAL 2003).

Weak voice. In most developing countries, public education clients have a weak voice. They express it at the ballot box by voting for national legislators and leaders. However, these leaders are responsible for the full range of government services, not just education. Clients demanding more or better education may have extremely weak voices relative to those of the military demanding armaments, the teachers' unions wanting higher salaries, or the wealthy resisting higher taxes.

Poor management. At the school level, the relationship between policymakers and frontline service providers contributes to weak accountability. Though policymakers have difficulty enforcing implementation of their policies and regulations down the chain of command in any bureaucracy, weak information systems in developing countries compound this inherent problem. Service providers have a large degree of latitude to follow their own agendas (Elmore 1990).

Insufficient information. Parents—and, in many cases, policymakers—lack information about school financing, spending, and outcomes. Even in developed countries, parents usually lack knowledge of the true effectiveness—the value-added—of their children's schools. The problem is compounded in developing countries because parents lack even the most basic information and cannot strengthen their voices through fact-based arguments. The absence of information on such issues as relative school performance also contributes to parental complacency and inaction. This is particularly true of parents who are poorly educated. Such inaction reduces the capacity of decisionmakers to implement preferred school policies.

Confusing roles. Even if parents have information about the school or teacher performance, often they do not know how to make a complaint or to whom to complain. Educational responsibilities are not always transparent. In decentralized or decentralizing systems, it is even more difficult to know who is responsible for what. Education legislation is often ambiguous about the functions of each level of government, and shared responsibilities often result from compromises. Even more ambiguity is added when education ministries resist implementing decentralization legislation to maintain their patronage and procurement powers.

Weak incentives. Strong accountability requires strong incentives. In a competitive, private market, failure to meet client demand translates into bankruptcy—or at least a declining market share. In countries such as Chile, public sector managers face criminal charges if auditors find they have spent their budgets incorrectly. In public education, however, almost no one suffers adverse consequences if children fail to learn. Teachers' pay is usually not linked to their performance in the classroom. Teachers and principals almost never lose their employment as a result of students' poor test performance. In developing countries, teachers and principals are seldom evaluated, much less rewarded or penalized for performance.

What Can Be Done?

The recipe for strengthening accountability is straightforward and includes the following actions:

- Strengthen client voice
- Improve management
- Provide better information to clients
- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Increase incentives and consequences

Causes of Weak Accountability

- Weak voice
- Poor management
- Insufficient information
- Confusing roles
- Weak incentives



How to Increase Client Voice

- Decrease distance between client and policymaker
- Create single-purpose governments
- Introduce participatory mechanisms
- Give clients choice
- Involve parents in schools

Strengthen Client Voice

Options for increasing client voice in public education include:

- decreasing the distance between clients and policymakers;
- creating single-purpose governments;
- introducing participatory mechanisms;
- giving clients choice; and
- involving parents in schools.

Other things equal, parents can better express their demand for more or better public education the closer they are to policymakers. Regionalizing education makes the distance between parents and policymakers shorter. Client voice is increased when educational decisionmaking is located in lower levels of government or when it resides in schools or networks of small schools.

Arguably, client voice is also strengthened when single-purpose governments are created. In the United States, the familiar form is the school district, whose sole function is to finance and deliver public education. Voters express their educational preferences more clearly because school board members are elected solely on the basis of education issues.

Another option for increasing client voice is to supplement elected government officials with education councils, whether elected or appointed. In most cases, such councils are strictly advisory, but they can still have substantial influence in identifying priorities. At school levels, advisory councils can also increase voice when they are given important functions such as monitoring teacher attendance. Parents can also increase their voice by creating associations of PTAs or school boards. By taking part in participatory budgeting, citizens can help identify spending priorities.

Just as competition in the private sector makes companies more responsive to their clients, the voice of parents is increased when they have the choice of moving their children from one school to another. The threat of exit can stimulate providers to be more responsive to clients. In the United States, school vouchers give parents the choice of selecting public or private schools. Publicly financed charter schools are another option.

Direct participation by parents in schools—as volunteers, monitors, or sources of funding—can increase their voice. In Peru, where years of declining education spending forced parents to contribute financially to public schools, the president of a parent’s association may have an office adjoining that of the school principal. While financial and in-kind contributions do not ensure an important role for parents in school decisionmaking, they offer the threat that failure to listen may result in decreased school resources.

Improve Management

Strengthening client voice effectively reduces the distance between client and policymaker. But even if the policymaker is responsive, he or she needs to ensure that frontline service providers are complying with directives and providing services desired by parents. Options for improving management include:

- establishing a client-oriented culture;
- developing performance targets;
- improving monitoring;

- delegating budgets and responsibilities;
- offering performance incentives;
- investing in human resources; and
- instituting predictable financing.

Creating an education culture oriented to clients—one that listens to parents—can improve public education management. Reform efforts in big-city U.S. school systems demonstrate improved management and performance when there is explicit agreement on performance targets; delegation of budget decisionmaking powers and responsibilities for reaching these targets; incentives and consequences for good and poor performance; and motivated and trained employees who receive annual evaluations that affect salaries and career prospects (Bryk, Kerbow, and Rollow 1997; Ross et al. 1998).

Predictable financing flows benefit educational planning and contribute to effective use of resources. However, education ministries in developing countries often face highly uncertain financing. A study in Ecuador, for example, showed that ministries were granted budgets but not allowed to spend against them without the finance ministry's permission. Often, this permission was granted only in the final quarter of the fiscal year. Schools thus received essential resources only after the school year was well underway (World Bank 2000).

Despite some important constraints education ministries' power to improve predictability in financing, change civil service rules, or recruit qualified staff, there is much they can do. They can set performance targets, issue decrees that delegate responsibilities, and change the ministry's client orientation. For example, a Brazilian education minister recently established an 800 telephone number to be used by citizens with complaints or questions. He insisted that ministry staff report on their responses to these calls.

Provide Better Information to Clients

To improve educational planning and decisionmaking, international donors invested large sums in education management information systems (EMIS). These have often been subsequently abandoned because policymakers had little real demand for the information. However, information systems that inform clients, improve accountability, and stimulate citizen demand for better performance have not been created either. Paraná state in Brazil provides one exception. It produced school-level report cards for parents and citizens, using information from EMIS, state and national testing programs, and parent surveys (Sevilla and Winkler 2003).

Parents need three basic kinds of information about schools:

- Minimum service standards that set a benchmark of inputs used to assess schools.
- Academic performance indicators that include measures of student learning and academic success, such as standardized test scores, repetition rates, dropout rates, university acceptance, and external school evaluation reports.
- Financial performance data that include such measures as expenditures per pupil, class size, teacher qualifications, and building safety. In addition, a measure of leakage due to corruption or bureaucratic inefficiency could be included, such as national or regional expenditures per pupil divided by actual school expenditures per pupil.

How information is disseminated and presented to parents is as important as its content. Information such as school evaluation reports and school budgets might simply be publicly posted on a school bulletin board. Information such as scores on national standardized tests might

How to Improve Educational Management

- Establish a client-oriented culture
- Develop performance targets
- Improve monitoring
- Delegate budgets and responsibilities
- Offer performance incentives
- Invest in human resources
- Institute predictable financing



What School Report Cards Should Include

- Explanations of minimum service standards or benchmarks used to assess schools
- Measures of student learning and academic performance
- Data on financial performance such as expenditures per pupil
- Information that is comparative, relevant, and selective

be published in newspapers and on the internet. However, most education information should be presented in school-level or municipal-level report cards.

The school report card should compare the target school's performance with other schools in the region, with itself over time, and with national standards. It must also contain relevant and straightforward information targeted to parents and other citizens, not technical information used by educational planners. Information provided also needs to be selective, focusing on a limited number of academic and financial indicators. Too much information can be confusing.

Whenever possible, information that is comparative, relevant, and selective should be presented graphically rather than in tabular form. Few parents are statisticians, and many do not read well or understand numbers.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

When educational functions are divided among different levels of government, some responsibilities are shared by more than one level while others appear to not be assigned. Accountability requires transparency and clarity about who is responsible for what. It also requires that shared responsibilities are identified and eliminated.

Increase Incentives and Consequences

Accountability means very little if there are no consequences for subpar or outstanding performance. Traditionally organized and managed education systems offer little in terms of incentives for good performance. Indeed, there is more emphasis on ensuring employment security than ensuring children learn. Actions that create the incentives and consequences required for accountability include:

- rewarding schools that perform better than expected;
- providing funding for good school development plans;
- tying career advancement to performance; and
- publicizing good and bad performance.

Chile's P-900 program provides financial rewards for schools performing better than expected. The main difficulty is accurately identifying such performance. Schools that meet agreed-upon performance targets could also be rewarded. So could those that provide funding for their own school development plans. Though merit pay for teachers has not had much success, career advancement could be more closely tied to teaching performance. Another approach is to publicize school performance scores so that politicians representing poor performing schools suffer at the polls.

The Challenges of Creating Accountability

The challenges of creating educational accountability challenges fall into two broad categories: those external and internal to the education sector. The external challenges cannot be changed by the education sector alone. Among them are the following:

- Citizens lack experience with popular democracy. Their resultant passive behavior reduces the voice of parents and citizens in education.
- Weak management practices pervade the public sector, making it difficult for the management of the education sector to improve.
- Poor public budgeting and spending practices produce unpredictable education funding.

- Shared responsibilities result from political compromise and require renegotiation to be changed.

Among challenges that are internal to the education sector are the following:

- Public schools rarely welcome parental involvement, except for their financial contributions.
- Reliable information on academic performance at the school level is almost never available.
- Schools lack an evaluation culture: neither teachers nor schools are evaluated.

The challenges of creating accountability in public education in developing countries are daunting and unlikely to be overcome quickly. However, there are many opportunities for solving specific challenges and preparing the way for greatly improved accountability. Failure to seize these opportunities will only ensure that accountability never comes to public education.

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Acknowledgements

This paper was written for EQUIP2 by Donald R. Winkler (RTI), 2004.

EQUIP2: Educational Policy, Systems Development, and Management is one of three USAID-funded Leader with Associates Cooperative Agreements under the umbrella heading Educational Quality Improvement Program (EQUIP). As a Leader with Associates mechanism, EQUIP2 accommodates buy-in awards from USAID bureaus and missions to support the goal of building education quality at the national, sub-national, and cross-community levels.

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This paper was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under Cooperative Agreement No. GDG-A-00-03-00008-00. The contents are the responsibility of the Academy for Educational Development (AED) through the Educational Quality Improvement Program 2 (EQUIP2) and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.