



AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE NEW ERA OF AMERICAN EDUCATION by Cara Stillings Candal

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When in 1965 the federal government passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the shape of American education was forever changed. The ESEA, which was conceived to target federal dollars to schools with high concentrations of socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, marked the first major federal financial involvement in K-12 education. Federal involvement in education, financial or otherwise, is significant, as the US federal government has no constitutional authority for education. Detractors of ESEA feared that the legislation would empower the federal government to drive policy in the 50 states. For good or ill, to a large extent, that fear has been realized.

The past decade of education reform in the United States has been marked by federal policies that tie accountability for outcomes and, to a lesser extent, the promotion of school choice to the money that states receive under ESEA. Though still a relatively small percentage (between 8 and 10 percent) of the funding that an average American public school receives, states and localities alike have become dependent upon the funding funneled to them by the federal government, and accepting that money means that states and localities must comply with certain federal requirements.

In 2001, the early days of the George W. Bush administration, Congress passed into law, with broad bi-partisan support, a new version of the ESEA titled “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). For the first time in American education history, states that accepted federal ESEA funds, were compelled by the law to design curriculum standards and implement annual examinations at the K-8 level that would measure student progress toward those standards. The overarching goal of NCLB was that every child would be “proficient” (as defined by the state in which he or she lived) in reading and mathematics by the year 2014. Under the law, states were required to set benchmarks for their progress toward 100 percent proficiency—schools failing to meet annual benchmarks would be audited and supported but eventually closed or reconfigured if they failed to improve.

In hindsight, the success of NCLB is that it opened a nation’s eyes to the diverse and unequal standards to which schools in different states and localities were held—if they were held to standards at all—before the law was passed. The reform brought to public attention a longstanding academic dialogue about the achievement gaps between rich and poor, minority and majority students in the United States. The ultimate failure of NCLB, however, was that it set unrealistic goals for student and school performance and that it caused schools, especially those that struggled to meet state standards, to focus too narrowly on only those aspects of curricula for which they are held accountable. Moreover, although the law required that all states *have* standards, it gave them too much autonomy in the creation of them; NCLB did not have an effective mechanism for ensuring that standards were similar or, more importantly, of similar quality from state to state.

In July 2009, when Barak Obama was elected president, the ESEA, the reauthorization of the ESEA was a task that had been languishing in Congress for two years—lawmakers could not agree on what a revised version of the law should look like. Obama, a dynamic new president, had strong ideas about what the content of any new education law should be, but it seemed doubtful that the new president would be able to convince many in his own party that some of the unpopular reforms he championed—such a greater accountability for teachers and an increase in the number of high-performing charter schools¹—should be authorized and implemented.

Instead of rushing to redesign and reauthorize ESEA, the Obama administration instead moved quickly to authorize another federal education program as a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The grant-based program, known as Race to the Top (RTT), in many ways picks up where NCLB leaves off, though it is unrelated to the law. Under the program, the federal government has been able to promote within states a new set of nationwide standards, known as the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) and other reforms, some of which focus on providing greater school choice to families. As of August 2012, nineteen states have

received RTTT funding to do things such as “adopt more rigorous standards and assessments,” reform the recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers and principals, turn around low performing schools, and “build data systems that measure student success.”²

If the turn of the century in US education was defined by the No Child left Behind Act and the curriculum standards and examinations that came with it, the Race to the Top era in American education is, in part, defined by a refinement of NCLB’s vision: Supporters of Race to the Top believe that it emphasizes more equal access to more rigorous curricula and better teachers. Many believe that by focusing on charter schools as a mechanism for turning around low performing schools, it also emphasizes greater school autonomy and choice for parents.

But Race to the Top does not seek to refine or even advance all aspects of the NCLB agenda. It is yet unclear what accountability for school and student performance will look like in the Race to the Top era. While “common assessments” are being crafted to align to the new Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), it is not clear how states and schools will be held accountable for performance on those examinations. It is also not clear what examinations will mean for students. States still have separate accountability systems in place from the NCLB era, many of which, according to experts, are weak at best, because they do little to hold students or failing schools accountable.³ Moreover, because of its many unrealistic constraints, including the expectation that all students, even those recently immigrated to the United States, be proficient in reading and math by 2014, the Obama administration by June of 2012, had granted twenty-four states waivers from many of the accountability requirements they had agreed to under the law.⁴

Some important questions to ask about accountability measures in the Race to the Top era are:

1. Will accountability standards have no real connection to whether or not students pass on from one subject or grade to the next, or will the standards be used to signal to a student that he or she has skills to master before advancing to a new aspect of the curriculum?
2. What will student performance on examinations mean for teachers? Will teachers who fail to move students along be held accountable in some official manner? Will that accountability for teachers be consistent across localities? Across states?
3. What supports might be provided to teachers and students who fail to meet standard? To local districts? To states?

All of these questions have yet to be answered, and it is likely that it will be some time before stakeholders begin to understand what the answers should be. What is clear, however, is that these questions and the many others that have arisen in the Race to the Top era strike at the heart of what the balance between accountability for outcomes and a school's autonomy to help students achieve solid outcomes should look like.

The race to the top era and accountability

States that won RTT grant monies showed in their applications a willingness to “reform” their approach to education in a manner consistent with that deemed necessary by the authors of the program. In 2010, states were invited to submit proposals to the federal government, outlining their plans for reform. In competition with one another for federal money that was both unprecedented in amount and relatively scarce given the number of states vying for it, successful states learned early on that promising to do two key things (among many) would make them more likely to win the federal competition.

First, states that agreed to sign on to a national Common Core Curriculum were given preference in the first round of the competition. Second, states that agreed to reforms that would allow schools of choice, namely high performing charter schools, to expand their reach were also given preference.

The RTT competition is therefore geared toward simultaneously centralizing the content for which schools are accountable to teach children and providing schools and families with different options for configuring and selecting the *public* schools that children will attend top down accountability coupled with some autonomy for schools. The reality of the new accountability, however, is difficult to comprehend.

While the Common Core State standards, unlike No Child Left Behind, aim to bring all state standards up to a higher level of difficulty, there are concerns that they ultimately lower the high standards that some states had in place under No Child Left Behind. Perhaps more importantly however, it is as yet unclear how schools and states will be judged upon student performance. Perhaps more importantly, it is also unclear how states and schools that are judged to have inadequate student performance will be held accountable.

What is increasingly clear is that the proficiency goals to which schools and states were held accountable under NCLB will not survive in the RTT era, despite the fact that NCLB is still law while RTT remains only a federal grant scheme. Though the NCLB waivers granted by the Obama administration have been criticized in some

circles, it is clear to most policy makers that most states NCLB accountability plans were not as effective as they could be and, because of these laws proficiency requirements, were unrealistic.

Importantly, support for releasing states from the requirements of NCLB has been coupled with general support for the Common Core Curriculum promoted under the RTTT program. The architects of the Common Core, which included state governors, school superintendents, education policy leaders, educators, and academics from across the country, claim that the curriculum better represents the kinds of skills that will help students to succeed in post-secondary education. They also note that the Core emphasizes depth of knowledge over breadth of content; it encourages schools and teachers to cover core content discursively— not only because of an emphasis on the importance of reading and writing across content areas but also because the Common Core expects that students be able to demonstrate knowledge and skill in multiple ways.

An emphasis on multiple ways of delivering, experiencing and assessing Common Core content is both a reaction to the multiple choice examinations that all states crafted under NCLB (which limited the ability of students to show what they knew and could do in relation to the standards) and recognition that different students require different approaches to teaching and learning to be successful. Problematically, however, it will be difficult to measure the value of each approach to delivering and assessing curricula, especially if meaningful measures of accountability are to be attached to the examinations that states and localities administer.

Whereas a standard multiple choice examination provides a common yardstick by which to measure what students know, allowing for multiple modes of assessment presents challenges. According to the two Consortia formed (with federal money) to create the assessments, in addition to a core of multiple choice items, the Common Assessments will include other measures of what students know and can do, including but not limited to: portfolios of student work, real time assessments of “performance” on a task (such as performing a laboratory experiment), and short answer and extended response writing tasks in multiple subject areas.⁵

Allowing different states, localities, and even teachers to choose and/or use these various assessment methods means that assessments will be more qualitative, subjective, difficult to deliver in valid ways, and difficult to score in reliable ways. Indeed, some states piloted the use portfolio and other performance based assessments under their No Child Left Behind accountability plans; on the whole results were very disappointing: “Separate studies by nationally respected researchers showed that as a school accountability tool, portfolio assessment was a huge flop in both states, yielding results that were wildly unreliable and very

expensive to obtain.

Among the problems found:

- A failure to yield reliable comparative data.
- Large differences in the way teachers implemented portfolios.
- Major differences in the degree of difficulty of assignments, rendering “comparisons among students or groups of students highly misleading.”⁶

Moreover, according to the two Consortia, which will pilot the assessments in 2012 and plan to first implement them in 2014, states and localities will need to rely upon technology to assess students.⁷ Computer based testing has become widely used in many disciplines in recent years, especially for professional certification, but the availability and quality of technology varies widely from state to state, locality to locality, and even school to school; a lack of widely available or reliable technology could impact the ways in which students experience assessments and the ways in which educators receive and use assessment data.⁸

This important question about “how” accountability for outcomes will look in the Race to the Top era relates directly to whether or not accountability for outcomes (be it at the level of the student, the teacher, or the school) will be an idea that persists and prevails in the near future of American education policy. Will the US continue to emphasize the importance of measuring how well students are performing and how well individual schools are serving students and will they be able to do so in a valid and reliable way? Or, will an emphasis on accountability for outcomes fade in favor of a more flexible approach to delivering and assessing curricula? Can accountability that provides incentives for good performance and doles out consequences for unsuccessful performance co-exist with an approach that could hold different students to different standards even when they are all learning from the same common curriculum?

The race to the top era and autonomy

Questions about accountability, while important, should not overwhelm discussion of the important autonomies that the RTTT era approach to curriculum and assessment provides to educators. For some, a more flexible approach to delivering and assessing curricula is a prerequisite for improving the quality of education in the United States overall.

Detractors of NCLB's one-size-fits all approach argue that the multiple choice assessment format that prevailed under NCLB prevents some students from demonstrating that they have mastered a skill. They also argue that too many states implemented standards under NCLB that favor breadth of knowledge (how many skills does a student possess within one subject area?) over depth of knowledge (how well can a student perform a specific skill and how deep is a student's understanding of a given concept?). There is a difference, detractors say, between being able to tick the right answer on a multiple choice math test and being able to explain how one arrived at the right answer or how the math concept under scrutiny applies to something in the wider world.

Importantly, as schools begin to focus on depth of knowledge over breadth of content and as schools and teachers are granted more flexibilities in how they assess student performance, the work of teaching, which has always been critical to student success, is likely to be highlighted in a way that it has not been before. Whereas under NCLB teachers were scrutinized for the data that their students produced (scores on multiple choice examinations), in the RTTT era it is likely that teachers will continue to be scrutinized for that data in addition to being scrutinized for the work or lack thereof that produced that data.

Qualitative measures of student work, such as portfolios, may be a more direct reflection on the work that a teacher demands of a student than it is of what students know and can do. Teacher evaluators who review such assessments may be more apt to question why a teacher made a certain curricular choice or opted to assess a student in a particular way. In this sense, the additional flexibilities that RTTT and the CCSSI provide to schools and families are an important components of a more general push to improve school quality across the states.

Also, under Race to the Top, states are strongly encouraged to foster innovative school options for parents, such as high performing charter or other schools that espouse a particular program or mission. Many charter schools, in particular, have produced strong outcomes for poor and minority students, and in many cases charter schools have allowed parents to choose a school well suited to the needs of their children. If, in the RTTT era, students and families have more school options, it stands to reason that the different ways in which schools can choose to deliver curricula and assess students could be better tailored to individual needs.

Coupled with this push for increased choice for families and students, RTTT also encourages states to provide localities with greater flexibility in how they hire, fire, and pay teachers. The grant scheme rewards states willing to experiment with differential pay for teachers—something that, in many states, has been difficult, if not impossible due to the strength of teachers unions. Moreover, encouraging states to authorize more charter schools means, (in states with policies that allow charters the right freedoms) that school leaders will be free from the constraints of teachers

unions when it comes to hiring and firing teachers. Whereas in the traditional public school system it can take years and considerable amounts of paperwork to fire an incompetent or ineffective teacher, charter schools in many states have the autonomy to hire and fire teachers at will (though within legal reason).

These reforms do more than any other in American education history to address what is probably the biggest factor in the achievement gap that exists between poor and middle class, minority and majority students: a lack of quality teachers in the classrooms where they are needed most. As in many countries, research consistently find that effective teachers make the difference in student achievement that effective teachers are too scarce, especially in the nation's poorest communities.

RTTT even has a strong component that requires states receiving grants to design and implement strong teacher evaluation systems—systems that rely upon data generated by standardized tests, observations of teacher work, and other measures to determine whether or not a teacher is producing desired achievement results.⁹ Most of these systems are still under development and will not be implemented for some time, and states are realizing the challenges inherent in creating a large scale teacher evaluation tool that yields meaningful information about teacher performance. Perhaps more problematic, unless other mechanisms are in place at the state level to ensure that objective and reliable student achievement data exists and to ensure that the teachers unions that dominate education politics in so many states are no longer able to protect low-performing teachers, the effectiveness of these teacher evaluation tools will be questioned.

Conclusions

The turn-of-the century in American education was characterized by a profound change in how policymakers, educators, parents, and students view the right to a quality education and how to determine whether or not quality education is being delivered. The *No Child Left Behind Act* put the US on a new path to emphasizing the importance of accountability for outcomes and ensured that the structure of education in the US began to look somewhat more similar to that in other countries, especially in Europe, where the importance of both centralized curricula and local autonomy are recognized. But the law itself was necessarily imperfect; it was only a first step in understanding how to balance central authority for the content of what students know and for student results with the autonomy to deliver education in a way specific to each community, each school, and each student.

The Race to the Top era in education builds off much of No Child Left Behind initiated while expanding the influence of the federal government, through incentive schemes,

over the curricula that schools deliver and some of the mechanisms in place to deliver it, such as autonomous schools. It remains to be seen, however, if this era in education will be characterized by a kind of accountability backlash—an eschewing of accountability reforms based on objective and quantifiable measures of student results.

Endnotes

¹ Charter schools are privately-run, publicly funded schools that have been growing in popularity in the United States since their inception in the late 1980s. These schools are public and may not discriminate as to whom they accept, but in exchange for greater accountability for results, charter schools are more autonomous than their regular public counterparts. In most states that allow them (the majority of states), charter schools do not have to be unionized and charter school leaders have greater autonomy to hire and fire who they please, set operating budgets, and define their own missions, pedagogical approaches, and curriculum. Nationwide but particularly in some states, charter schools have performed very well and have become an attractive alternative for students and families not traditionally well served in the public system

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³ Winkler, Amber M. “What should accountability look like in the Common Core era? “Common Core Watch,” Thomas B. Fordham Institute, April 5, 2012, edexcellence.net.

⁴ Klein, Alyson. “Five more states get NCLB waivers,” *Education Week*, June 29, 2012, edweek.org.

⁵ “Coming together to raise achievement: new assessments for the Common Core Standards,” (July 2011), Center for K-12 Assessments and Performance Management, Educational Testing Services.

⁶ Holland, Robert (2007), “Portfolios: A backward step in accountability,” The Lexington Institute, Arlington, VA.

⁷ “Coming together to raise achievement,” (July 2012).

⁸ “Computer adaptive testing poses challenges, expert warns,” *Education Week*, May 25, 2011, edweek.org.

⁹ “Coming together to raise achievement,” (July 2012).