

ACCOUNTABILITY IN EDUCATION

Background Paper

Education accountability defines and directs the learning system in Alberta today, but not necessarily in ways that will address students' needs in the 21st century. The Accountability Framework was introduced by government about 10 years ago during a time of restructuring, downsizing and funding cutbacks, and has yet to be reviewed for its present or continuing effectiveness and future viability.

Parents, trustees, school and central office administrators, and teachers have expressed concerns about dysfunctional aspects of Alberta Education's accountability system, including its narrow focus on testing in core subjects and its inflexibility in responding to local needs and priorities (Aitken et al. 2002). They have also expressed concerns about the appropriateness of the testing for students with special needs, English as a second language students, and many First Nations and Métis students. While attempts have been made to mollify complaints by amplifying the more useful parts of the system, Alberta Education, as a whole, has not acted on the concerns but has instead pressed on with more provincial assessments and controls.

It is time for education partners and Alberta Education to show principled leadership and engage each other in a review of accountability to ensure that the system is supportive of the direction desired by Albertans. Necessary improvements are needed to ensure that the full range of education goals is addressed, education partners share responsibility fully and the partners have the capacity to be responsive to changing needs. This background paper is intended to stimulate discussion for such a review.

DEFINITIONS

Accountability is an essential precondition of any sustained human relationship. The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* states that *accountable* is synonymous with *responsible* and defines it as "required to account for one's conduct." If a relationship is healthy and dynamic, the implication of this definition is that both parties in the relationship are accountable to each other and that the relationship enables both to thrive.

In Western democratic societies over the past 20 years or so, governments have tended to apply a particular notion of accountability to respond to the public's concerns about the effective use of tax dollars. In this context, accountability has come to mean the requirement of a public body or official to answer for the use of public

funds, the performance of public duties or the achievement of anticipated results. Accountability therefore is generally understood in terms of four questions: Who is held accountable? To whom? For what? And by what means? (Smith and Sturge Sparkes 2001, 99). In this sense, accountability is a necessary feature of public education and, indeed, helps to keep the "public" in schooling.

The Auditor General of Alberta (2004) defines *accountability* as "an obligation to answer for how one's assigned responsibilities have been carried out." The Auditor General states further that "accountability requires ministries, departments, and other entities to (1) report their results (what they spend and what they achieve) and compared to goals and targets, (2) explain any differences between their goals and results." This unilateral direction of accountability is consistent with the provincial government's managerial perspective as outlined in the *Government Accountability Act*. In the framework, once government direction is provided, the cycle of ministry and school board planning, budgeting, assessing, reporting and improvement spins only one way. The framework speaks primarily of increased results or movement toward numeric targets, not of inputs or capacity that would enable public education to produce improved results or make qualitative improvements.

In 2003, Alberta's Commission on Learning (ACOL) defined *accountability* as "a comprehensive process for measuring the achievement of students and the state of the education system, considering all the factors that affect achievement and outcomes, determining whether or not the education system is meeting its goals, reporting on the findings to all partners in education and in the community, and working together to channel resources and make improvements where they are needed." The commission went on to say that "accountability involves taking what we know and have learned from careful assessments and using that information to constantly improve results. Genuine accountability brings no surprises. It builds on effective sharing of information and collaboration between teachers and administrators, teachers and other teachers, teachers and students, schools and parents, schools and community. Fundamentally it is about moving and improving, not about shaming and blaming" (p 95). In a similar vein, the commission emphasized the importance of "addressing every child's special needs" and "using research and innovative approaches for improving student outcomes" (p 89 and p 98).

Early definitions of *accountability* that come from a power and control tradition are being broadened today because the one-way, top-down type of accountability has failed to engage, beyond mere compliance, those groups who actually implement the policy directive or program. In such education accountability systems, key stakeholders are likely to feel alienated, the full set of goals of education is not measured, and the opportunities for making deep, lasting improvements to the system are limited.

Given the limitations of these earlier notions of accountability, the Alberta Teachers' Association maintains that *accountability* is best defined as the process through which individuals or organizations in the education system take responsibility for their actions and report on these actions to those who are entitled to the information. *Accountability* also implies an obligation to find ways to improve the capacity and performance of those responsible, not just measure the achievement of outcomes (Canadian Teachers' Federation 2004c, 1).

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN EDUCATION

The current model of accountability in education has its roots in the Provincial Student Evaluation Program, which government announced in 1980. Initially, achievement tests and diploma examinations served purposes other than those of accountability. By the mid-1980s, however, Alberta Education began looking to these assessment programs to provide the backbone of accountability reporting.

The following events chart the evolution of the current system:

1982—achievement tests implemented on a provincial sample basis to measure curriculum and report results at the provincial level.

1984—expansion of the achievement test sample to include all students, thereby enabling reporting results at the school board level; diploma examinations implemented to apply a consistent standard in measuring and reporting individual student achievement for certification of Grade 12 achievement purposes.

1988—new *School Act* focusing on students and learning; increasing emphasis on the basics, the core subjects of language arts, mathematics, science and social studies; early government discussions about development of indicators using test and examination results to facilitate accountability reporting to the public.

1992/93—downsizing regional offices and withdrawal of government from school evaluations as a means of monitoring for accountability purposes; ministry budget saved from downsizing transferred to student evaluation programs; shift to use of test and examination results to identify schools where performance is consistently low and to discuss with superintendents what they planned to do about it; introduction of a new policy on the placement of students with special needs in the regular classroom in the neighbourhood school.

1994—funding cutbacks; encouragement to “do more with less”; major restructuring of governance, funding and delivery of education; full funding of education provided by government to school boards; direct accountability relationship between the minister and school superintendent; introduction of site-based management, giving principals freedom to implement programs but with reduced funds; creation of MLA implementation committees—Roles and Responsibilities in Education and Accountability in Education; release of government’s first three-year plan for the Department of Education intended to establish “a more open and accountable education system as a key goal for improving education for Alberta’s students”; shift from concern about system inputs to concern only about student outcomes, primarily as defined in terms of provincial test and examination results.

1995—initial phase-in of provincially mandated accountability reporting requirements for school boards; requirement for all students to write the provincial achievement tests except if students are incapable of responding to the assessment in its original, approved or modified form or if participation would be harmful to the student.

1997/98—alignment of school plans with school board plans and school reports with school board results reports; school board plans and reports sent to ministry to meet accountability requirements.

2003—removal of the teaching profession from technical reviews of the diploma examinations; tests and examinations secured to permit reuse of the questions, and classroom teachers provided with only a brief look at the content of the tests and examinations on the day of administration; Learning Commission recommends reporting beyond student outcomes to include such areas as class size, special support for schools, fundraising and using SuperNet to report on key indicators of learning.

2004—*School Act* amended to specify added requirements for teachers to mark provincial achievement tests and diploma examinations; intention to proceed with Grade 4 achievement testing; increased reporting requirements for

school boards, now including class size, use of common satisfaction surveys, and sources and uses of education funding, fees and fundraising.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVING THE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

Alberta's Accountability Framework, under the *Government Accountability Act*, is designed to help the government manage the various sectors within its mandate, the education system being one of them. Provincial government requires that the ministry and school boards answer for how well they carried out their responsibilities, and Alberta Education has chosen to use student assessment results in core subjects extensively for its reporting. Because the ministry and school boards do not actually deliver education to students, and because student achievement is affected by many variables and over long periods of time, the ministry and, in turn, school boards exert systemic pressures on teachers and school administrators and make directives to get improved test results.

By using test results as the prime indicator, the ministry is only indirectly held accountable for fulfilling its major responsibilities, such as the provision of adequate resources to schools or the quality and impact of policy and program decisions. Without opportunities to take corrective action in the system, the pressures and controls exerted by the ministry can have, over the long-term, unintended adverse effects that actually limit students' opportunity to learn, and the overall system's capacity to achieve the goals of education.

Following are some of the areas where improvements could be made, which would result in a more effective accountability system.

- **Assessment that addresses the full range of education goals**

Many members of the public are unaware that provincial examinations and tests, although of high technical quality, have limited validity in terms of measuring achievement of the goals of education. They do not know that the tested parts of the core courses of mathematics, science, social studies and language arts are a fraction of the skill and knowledge students need to learn and of the values and predispositions they need to develop to be happy and productive members of society. For example, only parts of six out of 20 student learning outcomes stated in Alberta Education's *Guide to Education* (Alberta Learning 1997) can be measured on a paper-and-pencil test. Provincial assessments cannot measure such areas as students' ability to "speak clearly, accurately, and appropriately for the

context," "manage time and other resources to complete a task," "demonstrate initiative, leadership, flexibility, and persistence" or "have the desire and realize the need for lifelong learning."

In addition to assessing achievement of a limited number of goals, provincial assessments today are designed only for some students, primarily those with academic aptitude. Yet we know that book learning, while very important in a knowledge society, represents a very narrow span of children's gifts, talents and potential, and that society is more dependent than ever on a citizenry with a wide array of skills, knowledge and attitudes. Elliot Eisner (2001, 372), professor at Stanford University, says this about schooling: "We ought to be providing environments that enable each youngster in our schools to find a place in the educational sun. But when we narrow the program so that there is only a limited array of areas in which assessment occurs and performance is honoured, youngsters whose aptitudes and interests lie elsewhere are going to be marginalized in our schools."

The danger lies in the use of limited data generated from narrow provincial assessments to support policy decisions that fail to consider the complexity of schooling and the diversity of students served. By focusing on limited data, the system fails to include all children and to support the achievement of the more profound, broader education goals. The measures used in Alberta's education accountability system could be reviewed for inclusion of the full range of education goals to avoid this pitfall.

- **Quality standards implemented, not standardization**

Standards-based reform is intended to focus efforts at all levels in the education system on clearly articulated outcomes, theoretically permitting educators and policy-makers to use alternative ways of achieving the desired levels of learning. However, Alberta's accountability system is driven by provincial assessments that, while limited in scope, are nonetheless powerful in focusing attention. The assessments define not only what outcomes are to be achieved but also how they will be achieved, because curricula, methods of instruction, school programs and districtwide approaches have become standardized throughout the province. Care must be taken to ensure that the capacity of education partners to be responsive to the diverse needs of schools, their students and their communities is not diminished or opportunities to find better ways of doing things are not limited through standardization.

Students with disabilities, roughly 10 per cent of the population, must have an Individualized Program Plan (IPP). These students require specific changes to the

regular curriculum, staffing, instruction, evaluation, materials, resources, facilities and/or equipment (Alberta Learning 1997). The placement of students with special needs in regular classrooms is based on the principles of equity, sharing, participation and the worth and dignity of all people. As the individual needs of each student are the primary focus in providing an education, so must be the method of evaluation and reporting of achievement. Standardized tests measure how well students in regular, core academic programs master provincial learning outcomes. They are not valid measures of the achievement of students with special needs, so some other means is needed to ensure that these students are not ignored by the system.

Many believe that every student is unique and has preferred styles of learning that may not match the approaches used on standardized tests. As Eisner (2001, 372) states, “Children become more different as they get older, and we ought to be promoting those differences and at the same time working to escalate the mean.” Eisner explains the problem this way: “in our push for attaining standards for all students, we have tended to focus on outcomes that are standard for all youngsters. I would argue that really good schools increase variance in student performance. Really good schools increase the variance and raise the mean.” Provincial testing can have the effect of channelling everyone’s attention to the selected outcomes that are measured, and may not permit school environments where students play to their strengths, or where students can develop their “nonstandard” talents and interests further.

Standardized testing is designed to ignore or override external factors affecting individuals, such as poverty; parents’ educational level; mental, physical and emotional health; the effects of racial and other forms of discrimination; and language of origin during measurement. Yet, Alberta researchers have shown that these factors can account for 40 to 50 per cent of student achievement (Lytton and Pyryt 1998). The accountability system could address these factors at various stages of data gathering, reporting and reviewing.

Standardized testing, when used as a main driver in an accountability system, affects students’ motivation and attitude toward learning, too. When students focus on achieving high test scores, they are less likely to learn to their capacity, love learning and value creative thinking, accept mistakes as a normal part of learning and develop their unique learning styles. Many students, even at a very young age, experience unnecessary stress when writing tests. Research has shown that children under stress do not learn well (Ohanian 1999). Alternative forms of assessing

students’ levels of achievement and progress could be used in the system.

Extensive research has been conducted on the use of assessments based on a standards approach in which a broad range of assessment tasks and responses are possible. Research shows that when performance assessments rather than paper-and-pencil tests are used, teacher practice improves, student learning deepens and results are easily reported. After studying accountability in noneducation systems, researchers at Rand Corporation recommend that “performance measures in education be broadened, as this will diffuse the pressure to focus too narrowly and to de-emphasize other important priorities” (Stecher and Kirby 2004). Alberta’s Commission on Learning (2003, 98) also recommends that we “continue to support research and innovative approaches for improving student outcomes” and speaks encouragingly of the work under way in schools under the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement.

- **Use of accountability data as a means of improving the system**

Public discussion often focuses on accountability indicator data as the final judgment, rather than as a point of interpretation and further study. Many Albertans have been led to believe that test results provide real, accurate and conclusive information about what is going on in schools and the system overall, and naively believe that if scores are high, no serious problems exist.

An opportunity exists to help the public understand that test results alone give an incomplete and sometimes inaccurate picture. Albertans should be made aware that a school that offers outstanding programs in the arts or vocational programs may not score high in provincial tests, yet excel in meeting the needs of their community. The public should be aware that Alberta’s students rank at or near the top in international tests, but when such factors as measurement and sampling error, family background, and school contexts are considered, Alberta’s ranking drops. After looking closely at results on the Program for International Student Assessment for 15-year-olds, analysts found that Alberta’s performance was actually fifth rather than first in Canada (Willms 2004). Simple rankings are often misleading.

Although the ministry policy does not support the ranking of schools using provincial assessment results, the Fraser Institute and others are permitted to regularly publish school and district rankings widely. Ranking schools places additional pressure on programs to conform to what is narrowly measured by the tests; this practice of ranking has the effect of limiting the curriculum, undermining

school climate, diminishing community confidence and support, and disregarding the intents and efforts of parents, students and teachers in the school.

The impact on students with special needs is significant. Many students are unable to participate fully in regular classrooms and may be excluded from provincial assessments to protect them from harm. A shift in accountability is needed from a system that is seen as “harmful” to some students to one that meaningfully includes all students and provides constructive and full information to teachers, students and parents.

If Albertans looked more closely at all the accountability data, they might want to reconsider government’s priorities for the education system. For example, more than one in four students do not complete high school in five years after entering Grade 10, and the percentage of Alberta high school students heading to postsecondary institutions is 43 per cent, the lowest amongst the provinces in Canada. According to Alan King, an education policy researcher at Queen’s University, this outcome is an unintended result of an accountability system’s continuing emphasis on high test scores in academic subjects (Schmidt 2005). Yet, research indicates that neither employability nor earnings significantly relate to students’ scores on basic skills tests, while chances of employment and welfare dependency are tightly linked to graduation from high school. Thus the use of tests as a key determinant of graduation can impose heavy personal and societal costs, without obvious social benefits (Darling-Hammond 2004b). Students would benefit ultimately if the accountability system could be designed to help Albertans make the connections between the pieces of outcome data generated, the desired goals of the system and the resources provided to schools.

- **Increased public confidence in accountability data**

Alberta Education highlights the importance of results on provincial, national and international student assessments in speeches, news conferences and media releases and holds school boards accountable for their students’ test scores. The investment and profile of these assessments lead many Albertans to believe that the results alone are meaningful and should be trusted. However, for some Albertans, the indicator data does not match personal experience, and when the data are produced within a closed system, they become mistrustful and ultimately ignore the data. For example, although the ministry uses international test results to assure Albertans that we have the best system in the world, the public appears unconvinced as public polling continues to show low levels of satisfaction with some aspects of the education system. In a poll conducted by R.A. Malatest and Associates for Alberta Learning in 2003, only 59 per cent of the public expressed satisfaction

with student preparedness for citizenship, 65 per cent agree that students are learning what they need to know, and 25 per cent agree with the actual information received on government spending in schools (Alberta Learning 2003a). In the United States, recent revelations of the inappropriate reporting of data by large corporations have served to undermine public trust both in the organizations and in the use of statistical data. Complete openness and comprehensive descriptions of the accomplishments of the education system, including contextual information and areas for further improvement, could raise confidence levels in the education system and in the accountability data reported.

- **Allocation of resources to support better accountability measures**

Substantial resources have been directed toward developing and implementing provincial assessments to the exclusion of broader-based measures to assess progress and identify learning needs. While it is very important to determine how well the education system is doing, assessing only a small provincial sample of students would be sufficient and far more cost-effective than testing every child.

More resources should be allocated to build capacity in the system and develop effective assessments for use by classroom teachers and for reporting by schools and school jurisdictions. Students would benefit from an accountability system in which teachers are in a position to make judgments or decisions about their programs’ effectiveness in meeting students’ needs, and can know when their programs are meeting provincewide expectations.

- **Roles and responsibilities of education partners enhanced**

Given the unilateral direction of accountability, current government procedures make it difficult to engage education partners fully in the process. The system could provide education partners with an opportunity to take responsibility for developing, promoting and implementing an agreed-upon accountability system of expectations and measures. Mechanisms that facilitate meaningful, ongoing collaboration with the teaching profession and other education partners would be very beneficial. Such enhancement would ensure that decisions taken from a provincial government perspective are also grounded in good pedagogy and reflect local concerns.

- **Support for teacher professionalism and judgment**

The current accountability system appears to hold one-shot, standardized, provincial tests as more credible than the wide range of teacher assessments and findings

thoughtfully applied throughout and at the end of the school year. For example, at 50 per cent of the student final mark, the diploma examination has a disproportionate weighting compared to the teacher-awarded mark.

Teachers are concerned about the erosion of class time for inquiry learning, laboratory and field activities, problem solving, oral work, team or small-group activities, and critical thinking as a result of the focus on examinations. Also, although the diploma examination measures only part of the curriculum, teachers feel pressured to ensure that their marks are similar to the diploma examination marks, thus helping to drive classroom instruction toward content that will be on the examinations. In this respect, 100 per cent of the student's final mark is determined by the examination.

Teachers are concerned that the lengthy diploma examination schedule takes valuable time away from instruction. Time pressures contribute to a narrowing of the curriculum, as available time is focused on the topics that will be on the provincial test or examination. Teachers are troubled about the cumulative impact on students writing examinations for extended periods. With the changes to the examination schedule and format, students with special needs have spent up to 10 consecutive hours writing. A major reason for the advent of externally controlled, high-standardized testing systems was the belief that teachers could not be trusted to make sound educational decisions about what students know and are able to do (Darling-Hammond 2004a). Many of these teaching and learning concerns could be addressed if the accountability system enhanced teachers' opportunity and capacity to make professional judgments.

- **Transparency in the provincial assessment process**

Government has increased the number of controls on the design and administration of the assessment instruments to enable comparison of test results at provincial and school levels from one year to the next and to report better statistical data. To do this, the government has found it necessary to limit or remove the profession's and the public's scrutiny of the instruments, undermining the usefulness of the measures for improving teaching and learning, and creating a closed, nontransparent system. Teachers feel alienated from the provincial assessments overall and, because they cannot review the instrument with their students, they feel alienated from their own students.

Policy decisions relating to scheduling, marking, imposed deadlines, implementation, access to examinations and use of results, to name a few, have been made with little or no consultation with the teaching profession. The profession's confidence in the integrity of the accountability system and

public support could be restored, however, through improved processes that are transparent and open, with decision making occurring through full discussion of the issues.

- **Use of a review mechanism**

The government's Accountability Framework should have a review mechanism with provision for a feedback loop to hear education partners' concerns and suggestions for improvement. Government has not consulted with education partners and the public on the accountability system since it was implemented in 1994.

The education ministry missed a recent opportunity to review its assessment programs. In 2002, Judy Gordon, MLA for Lacombe–Stettler, called upon the government to “review and re-evaluate the delivery of provincial achievement testing,” including the appropriateness of using the tests on very young children, the potential of the assessments to distort and limit classroom instruction, and the misuse of the testing data. Rather than involve the education partners in a review of the program, the ministry only completed an internal statistical analysis of the relationships between student performances on the various achievement tests and diploma examinations. Then, in the fall of 2004, senior ministry officials went about the province telling educators that they had completed the review and found the program effective with no basis for concern. Many of the education partners, however, do not feel that the provincial assessment program is doing what it was intended to do, and they believe that they should have an opportunity to explore their concerns openly.

EMERGING DIRECTIONS IN ACCOUNTABILITY

Current research and events in education suggest the following positive emerging directions:

- **Increasing interest in the broader goals of education.**

Business and community leaders agree with educators that the needs of our children and youth would be better served by a broad base of learning that goes beyond basic core subjects. The complexities of 21st-century society and the unpredictability of the forces acting upon it require citizens to become more engaged in democratic institutions, as the countervailing tendencies toward individualism and alienation are strong. The need for schools to address the full range of education goals is greater than ever (Symposium on “Being Alberta in 2025” 2004).

- **Greater recognition of the value of capacity building at all stages and levels of the accountability system.**

Increasingly, business and community leaders recognize

the role of learning and capacity building in a knowledge economy. The accountability process itself could engage all the education partners in learning and in building their capacity to support the education goals. Research literature points out that education partners need to improve their accountability skills and knowledge if they are to be effective contributors in a shared, two-way system. The external accountability imposed on schools and school jurisdictions through provincial policies and the internal accountability to which schools and school jurisdictions hold themselves must be connected and aligned. Then, both external and internal processes can provide opportunities for all education partners to fully understand and build capacity in the system (Starratt 2003, 229–30).

Enhanced technology to support system integrity and credibility of reporting. Computer technology today enables data from a complex system to be recorded, managed and reported easily without undermining the credibility of the information. This is possible as long as measurement instruments and processes are unfailingly transparent, accurate and defensible in presenting the whole story on the achievement of education goals. For example, a balanced system of accountability can be implemented that includes classroom assessments that provide estimates on how students are performing on a wide range of tasks, and standardized tests provide accurate external measures of performance on specific skill areas of the curriculum. The SuperNet can enable increased sharing and reporting of complex information.

Two-way shared accountability. Accountability in education in the past has been viewed as a one-way responsibility to show government that results have been achieved or that policies have been implemented. Current research literature, however, refers to a shared responsibility not only among educators and students but also among school administrators, school boards, parents and the government. Because these partners have different responsibilities, it is important to be clear about who is accountable to whom, for what and under what circumstances. The responsibility for student learning and overall education quality needs to be shared by the education partners. For example, government is responsible for providing the necessary funding and policy decisions to support schools and boards in delivering education to students.

Measuring what we value. Educators know about the power of feedback or measurement in directing learning. Therefore, in implementing accountability systems, we must learn to measure what we value rather than valuing what we can measure easily. For example, extensive

research has been conducted on the use of performance-based assessment such as portfolios, laboratory experiments, small-group reports and oral presentations, which provides a broader measure of student achievement and is more valid than paper-and-pencil tests. Such alternatives are available for careful consideration. However, measuring what we value needs to focus on the process of learning, including the process of analyzing student responses and using the results to develop pedagogy and improve practice.

Building commitment. Research literature shows that effective accountability systems encourage education partners to go beyond mere compliance with requirements. Commitment to the program or innovation is critical to success. Education partners expect meaningful involvement in decisions regarding goal setting and the design of the accountability process. Research shows, for example, that the teaching profession is willing to participate in an accountability system that recognizes and builds on teachers' pedagogical knowledge, skills and commitment to students.

CONTEXT FOR AN EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

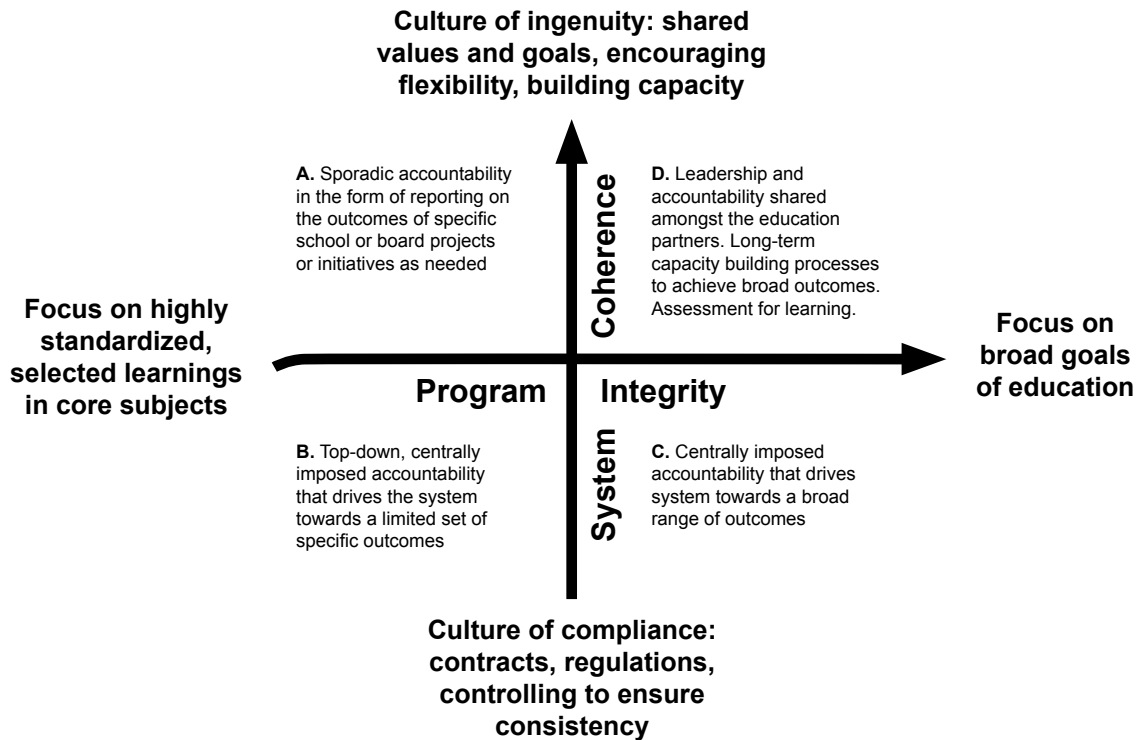
Discussions about accountability in education are often dominated by specific concerns about testing, which should be only a small part of the system. In order to develop a more dynamic and responsive vision of accountability, it is helpful to take a systemic view first, and then tackle the bits and pieces that make up the whole. Figure 1 is intended to help bridge from “where we are now” to “where we want to go.”

The figure provides four perspectives on accountability in education, based on the two intersecting axes of **System Coherence** and **Program Integrity**. The arrows on the axes represent a continuum with extreme conditions at either end and show the direction that is most desired for the system.

The **System Coherence** axis represents the extent to which key players in the learning system collaborate to achieve common goals based on shared values. In an ideal system, the education partners work together toward a culture of ingenuity, sharing values and goals, encouraging flexibility and responsiveness, and building capacity to fulfill their roles and responsibilities properly. This direction is supported in more recent literature on accountability. For example, Alberta's Auditor General (Auditor General Alberta 2004, 4–5), in a paper on accountability in learning, says that a shared commitment to monitoring system performance in terms of “the organization's ethical

Figure 1

Four Perspectives on Accountability in Education*



*Adapted from Alberta Teachers' Association (2004h).

values” is a core governance principle of accountability. In his view, “quality performance information” must be a composite of a number of nuanced measures.

Simplistic top-down approaches, however, lead more to compliance behaviour than to commitment. This is characterized by the other end of the *System Coherence* continuum, which promotes a culture of compliance that focuses on contracts, regulations and control. The benefit of this extreme lies in ensuring consistency, but there is a price to be paid. Visa founder Dee Hock puts it this way: “Have a simple, clear purpose which gives rise to complex, intelligent behaviour rather than complex rules and regulations that give rise to simplistic thinking and stupid behaviour” (Sparks 2004).

As Kanter (1977) also reminds us, a “command and control” approach to system management ultimately does not control what people do, but *what people cannot do*. More recently, Hargreaves (2003, 50) captured the current challenges faced in the attempt to improve learning for the “knowledge economy”:

One of the greatest issues in our society is the collapse of trust in institutions.

A primary reason for this collapse is a decreased sense of community caused by people spending less face-to-face time with each other. As communities have stretched, we’ve replaced community accountability through a shared culture—that is, the things we believe we agree upon—with contracts defined and imposed by outsiders. While such contracts can have value, when they diminish trust within communities, they lead to a sad and empty life. Trust has been replaced with written performance standards, standardized tests, managerial supervision, and government requirements and legislation.

The **Program Integrity** axis represents the range of education goals and the extent to which the accountability system supports them. When the education partners, the processes and the products in the system all support the attainment of the broad goals of education, we have a high level of *Program Integrity*. The review of the history of accountability and current concerns shows how disconnected the provincial assessment programs and the accountability processes are from supporting the desired goals. For example, the use of large-scale, high-stakes testing in Alberta schools does not cohere with the principles of professional learning communities. The focus

on increasing test scores in core subjects is incompatible with action research, collaborative inquiry and other forms of critical reflection (Mitchell and Sackney 2002). The Canadian Association of Principals has raised concerns about the disconnection between the stated goals of accountability frameworks and the growing reliance on large-scale testing: “such tests are not often situated within a coherent policy and an accountability framework based on learning and the overall assessment of student achievement” (Smith 2004, 10).

Four Possible Perspectives

The construct presents the following four perspectives on accountability in education, none of which alone adequately portrays the accountability system in Alberta.

Quadrant A—Accountability is sporadic and in the form of reporting on a limited set of outcomes that a specific school or school board project or initiative was established to achieve. This form of accountability highlights the unique achievements of the project or initiative as separate from other contributors to the effectiveness of the education system. Often such innovations survive only for as long as they are singled out for attention, and fail to be integrated into the education system as a whole or to contribute to the system’s overall effectiveness in the end.

Quadrant B—Accountability is top-down and centrally imposed to drive the system toward a limited set of specific outcomes, often selected learnings in core subjects. While this form of accountability is systemwide, it is focused on a narrow interpretation of the goals of education. This perspective is best exemplified by the roots of the accountability movement in Alberta in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when provincial assessments were seen as highly desirable because they focused the attention of the public and educators on a limited set of learnings that were often called the basics. This was a time in Alberta’s history of ballooning debt, and deliberate efforts were made to cut back on any redundancies and redefine and thereby reduce public expectations for the education system. This was also a time when excellence was construed to mean “doing a few things very well.”

Quadrant C—This view supports centrally imposed comprehensive accountability as a means of directing the entire education system toward achievement of a broad range of outcomes. Some of the decisions taken recently by the government suggest movement in this direction. Alberta’s Commission on Learning, for example, encourages assessment and reporting of a broader range of goals and some of the contexts and inputs in education. The relationship between the education partners, however, is largely defined by compliance with provincial

requirements or directions as in the traditional, hierarchical notion of accountability, and the form of measurement remains dominated by highly controlled, provincewide assessments. The type of accountability described in Quadrant C is not sustainable because, as shown in the research literature, such systems create dependency rather than build capacity. Compliance models of leadership rarely engender commitment within an organization to the goals of the system.

Quadrant D—Leadership is shared amongst the education partners. Each partner is respected for the contribution it makes to education and is held responsible for how well its contribution supports the attainment of the broad goals of education. Each of the education partners is fully engaged in the accountability system, and flexibility is encouraged to ensure that long-term capacity building takes place. In addition to a common foundation of knowledge, skills and attitudes, the education system enables a diversity of outcomes that recognize and encourage a wide array of students’ gifts, talents and potential. The metrics for assessment are designed to sustain diversity in programs. Assessment is viewed as *for* learning, rather than the current preoccupation with assessment *of* learning.

In summary, while each of the four quadrants may present both attractive and problematic features, the intent is to move our conception of accountability to a preferred state, one that the education partners believe will enable the education system to sustain improvement over the coming years.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF AN EFFECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

The following seven principles are presented as a foundation for reflecting on and improving the current accountability system.

Principle 1

Education partners have a shared understanding of and commitment to fairness, openness, respect for diversity and stewardship, key values underlying accountability in education.

The education system operates within the context of a democratic society. It is purposeful in serving the education needs of children and youth and of society in general. The system operates effectively because the education partners who contribute in specific and unique ways hold similar values.

In order for the education partners to trust each other and respond wholeheartedly to the issue of accountability, they reconfirm with each other a shared understanding and

commitment to values (Reeves 2004, 122) such as the following:

- **Fairness**—The rules are clear to everyone. They are applied consistently. Everyone has an opportunity to follow the same rules. Performance goals are fair for all students and all schools.
- **Openness**—The education partners together set guidelines for annual plans and reports that include accountability for both processes and results. Information gathering and reporting processes and documentation prepared by an education partner are available for scrutiny by others. The process of learning is openly displayed. Assessments are interpreted and evaluated for their effectiveness in leading to valuable learning goals and responsiveness to individual student learning styles and needs.
- **Respect for Diversity/Equal Educational Opportunity**—Each student has particular learning needs. Each student has particular aptitudes that deserve to be developed. Assessments are designed to gather information on the progress of all students. Each school and school jurisdiction responds in unique ways to the needs of the students and community it serves.
- **Stewardship**—Responsible use of available resources is made. Sufficient resources are allocated to accomplish education goals. The system enables responsive and responsible practice, which includes teacher knowledge, school improvement and problem solving, local flexibility in meeting the actual needs of real students, shared ethical commitment by everyone and appropriate public policy structures that encourage, not punish, an inclusive education system (Darling-Hammond 2004b).

By working from this base of shared values, education partners become comfortable in going beyond mere compliance with imposed requirements to commitment to fulfilling their respective roles and responsibilities.

Principle 2

The primary purpose of accountability in education is to support the broad goals of education and the diverse learning needs of children and youth.

In order to enjoy continued support from those it serves, the education system shows students, parents and the public that it is achieving the goals set for it. The education system recognizes and advances the differing gifts, talents and potential that children and youth possess, from which society ultimately benefits, and the different rates of learning. The education partners are sensitive to the fact that accountability processes provide powerful feedback

mechanisms to affect the perceptions and behaviours of those internal and external to the education system.

More important, however, accountability provides valuable information to the education partners for improving the contexts, inputs, processes and outcomes of the education system and enables the system to achieve its goals.

The goals of education are broad and long-term, and reflect the diversity of society. This means that information gathered and reported through the accountability system must also be broadly based and include results on the full range of performance measures, not only academic achievement. Assessments, whether at the classroom level or not, reflect the diversity of student aptitudes and rates of learning. The system respects the learning of students identified with a special education need by increasing expectations for these students while respecting the individualized nature of their learning ability.

As some of the goals are long-term and realized over time, and children and youth develop at different rates, meaningful achievement may not be immediately apparent. Some means of capturing long-term results is used as well.

Principle 3

Information for accountability purposes is gathered in a variety of ways from all relevant sources, and reported and used in ways that respect the limitations of the data.

Through the accountability system, education partners gather and report timely and useful information that goes far beyond provincial testing. The information is clear and easy to understand. Multiple measures that provide information on both process and results are used. Processes are transparent. Measures that assess student learning allow for the diversity of student interest, aptitude and rate of development.

Information that is gathered from education partners is relevant to their roles and responsibilities and ultimately helpful in improving the system's capacity to achieve the goals of education. Information gathering and reporting can be expensive and time-consuming, however, and the information needs of each of the partners and the public vary. Therefore, the education partners make decisions together about priority areas for data collection and reporting, and the tools and processes needed.

Mechanisms for gathering and reporting information are selected in terms of the purpose for which they are intended. Care is taken to ensure that the information gathered and reported is accurate and valid, and that any inferences or conclusions about the education system in

whole or in part are discussed by the partners prior to reporting.

Principle 4

Sound educational research and practice guide the design and implementation of an accountability system in education.

Accountability in education requires a complex system of many processes and interdependent variables that, when designed and implemented well, enhance the system's opportunities to achieve the goals of education. Sound education research and practice guide the design and implementation of accountability. Opportunities are built into the system to review practices in light of new research. The teaching profession works with education partners in the effective use of the research, because pedagogy, rather than political ideology, should have a stronger influence on interpreting and applying research in education.

Principle 5

Accountability in education enhances the capacity of education partners to fulfill their respective roles and responsibilities and leads to sustained improvement of the system.

Through accountability processes, education partners plan, gather and report information that shows how well they have fulfilled their respective roles and responsibilities. By reflecting on the processes used and the results each has achieved, and by engaging each other in the review, education partners are able to support each other in maximizing the effectiveness of their roles and to make continuous improvements to the education system as a whole.

Education partners can be accountable only if they have the capacity to cause a mandated result. This principle means that each of the partners is challenged to become fully aware of and seeks to enhance its knowledge and skills, the technical and financial resources, the autonomy to act, and the know-how to integrate all the resources needed to bring about the result.

Principle 6

Each education partner is accountable for those areas of the system within its authority and expertise.

The accountability system is committed to distributing leadership throughout education in order to improve learning opportunities for students (Smith 2004, 24). Education partners view accountability processes beyond their monitoring functions and focus on helping schools

build capacity for improvement within the context of the local communities they serve.

Each education partner brings a particular perspective and understanding to the system of accountability. For example, organizations such as the Canadian School Boards Association have emphasized the importance of policy and managerial accountability. The Canadian Teachers' Federation focuses on teachers' professional responsibility within the context of the limitations and opportunities delimited by the wider education system. Each contributes to creating opportunity and building capacity at all levels of the system, but is not held accountable for those areas that exceed its area of responsibility or its capacity to effect change.

Provincial government recognizes that school performance is enhanced by the interactions of the partners inside departments of education, school boards, schools and their communities committed to a common purpose: providing quality public education for all students. In Alberta's K–12 education system, political responsibility flows from the Legislature to the minister, and then on to school boards. However, government is also accountable for fiscal and policy decisions and for its involvement of the education partners during the decision-making process.

The teaching profession provides leadership in an accountability system that starts with the student, the school and the community and builds backward to school boards and to government. Teachers have professional expertise regarding all phases of the education of students, and they are accountable for contexts, processes, inputs and outputs of teaching and learning each day in the classroom. They work by a code of ethics that emphasizes devotion to service and the good of the student. They support the kind of accountability that enhances the capacity of the education system to respond to both current and future students' learning needs and societal needs.

The teaching profession has valuable expertise in education research and practice, and brings that expertise to bear on the design and implementation of an accountability system. The teaching profession also helps education partners advocate for policy changes and increased resources necessary to achieve the goals of education and supports the education partners in carrying out to the fullest extent their roles and responsibilities in relation to the goals.

Responsibilities of Education Partners

Legislation in Alberta defines specific roles and responsibilities for many of the education partners. Educators are guided as well by the Teaching Quality

Standard and the Code of Professional Conduct. The following lists of responsibilities are additional to or interpretative of each education partner's legal or professional responsibilities and are necessary to promote an accountability system that *builds capacity* and *creates opportunity* among the education partners.

Student Responsibilities

- Participate fully in learning opportunities provided at school; learn as much as possible.
- Support and care for each other during the learning process, share ideas and build on each other's ideas; help to build a community of learners.

Parent Responsibilities

- Recognize their parental responsibilities in the education of their children.
- Assert their rights to have access to a high-quality education for children.
- Support the work of the school council.
- Participate in the election of school trustees.
- Insist on transparency and genuine consultation on decisions related to the school, school district and provincial learning system.

Teacher Responsibilities

- Provide learning opportunities for all students through quality teaching practice.
- Continually improve instructional practice to enhance learning for students.
- Be responsible for student assessment and evaluation that leads to high standards of learning for each student.
- Be an engaged and reflective professional in the learning community.
- Recognize and demonstrate professionalism by making informed judgments that will lead to high standards of learning for each student.
- Enhance the profession by maintaining high standards of practice and conduct.

Principal Responsibilities (in addition to their teacher responsibilities)

- Provide leadership in optimizing teachers' and support staff's capacity to meet the learning needs of students.
- Ensure that school organization and administration are based on collegial, collaborative and sound pedagogical practices.
- Prepare school development plans that reflect school-community contexts and the necessary financial and human resources to achieve the learning needs of students.
- Act as the chief spokesperson for the school's vision, values and goals and the resources needed for the school development plan.

- Lead in the development of an internal accountability system that includes an array of measures of student learning that demonstrate high standards of achievement for all students.

School Council Responsibilities

- Understand and support the goals of public education.
- Represent community expectations of the school.
- Recognize the school as a full partner in the community.
- Be accountable for advice and representation.
- Advocate for programs and resources necessary to meet community expectations.
- Be involved in developing and supporting the school plan and in reviewing school results.
- Actively address social and economic factors that affect achievement at school.

Superintendent Responsibilities

- Foster dispersed leadership throughout schools by supporting a school organization that reflects the principles of professional learning communities.
- Support the school as the primary agent of the student evaluation process.
- Provide leadership in school improvement by encouraging staff to see themselves as learners, and provide opportunities for staff development and professional growth.

School Board Responsibilities

- Advocate for adequate funding and sound education programs and policies from the government.
- Develop a jurisdiction education plan that ensures that schools provide provincially approved education programs for students.
- Act as an independent level of government, with democratically elected trustees responsible for establishing budgets, bargaining with employees, and practising responsible stewardship of jurisdiction resources.
- Determine the budget required to optimally meet the learning needs of students in relation to the provincial program requirements.

Government and Ministry Responsibilities

- Provide sufficient funding to support the education partners in fulfilling their responsibilities and to attain the goals of public education.
- Support an accountability system that maintains coherence between the learning system's goals and measures of school and district performance.
- Support the school's role as the primary agent of evaluation by establishing reporting structures that build capacity for enhancing school-based assessments.
- Respect teacher professionalism and foster public participation and engagement in decision making.

- Coordinate services for children with other governmental agencies that will support the learning of all students.
- Conduct provincial testing for accountability purposes within the *Joint Position Statement by the Canadian Psychological Association and the Canadian Association for School Psychologists on the Canadian Press Coverage of the Province-Wide Achievement Tests Results*.

Alberta Teachers' Association Responsibilities

- Assume responsibility for ethical conduct in terms of the Code of Professional Conduct and standards of professional practice, as determined by the Teaching Quality Standard, through practice review.
- Provide professional services to members and education partners that assist school communities in improving learning opportunities for students.
- Actively support the improvement of instructional practice and educational leadership through ongoing professional development.
- Foster principled social and community partnerships in order to advocate for children.

Principle 7

The system of accountability in education is evaluated on an ongoing basis.

All education partners review the various aspects of the accountability system and reflect on its processes, the guiding principles and any opportunities for improving the system. This review occurs informally on an ongoing basis and formally every five years.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper presents an analysis of the meaning of accountability, the historical development of Alberta's accountability system and the problems that have arisen in education as a result. Against a backdrop of a robust economy, dramatic shifts in population and growth, environmental and resource depletion, and a host of unforeseen global forces, Albertans in the 21st century have been looking to education to help ensure a progressive and prosperous province. An outmoded, hierarchical accountability system can only stand in the way.

Today, leaders in business, the community and education agree that Albertans must recognize the complexity in problems and solutions, focus on increasing resilience in people and institutions, use decentralization and experimentation to search for possible solutions, and front load ingenuity. They agree that the education system must

embrace complexity and develop ways of measuring student learning that go beyond simplistic pencil-and-paper tests. As one Alberta business leader put it, "We need metrics, ways of measuring learning that reflect the future not the past" (Symposium on "Being Alberta in 2025" 2004). The teaching profession is also concerned that government presents no opportunity for the partners to review the accountability system or the problems associated with its overdependence on provincial assessments.

This paper also provides a list of some promising directions in accountability and proposes some fundamental principles that could be used as a discussion starter for the education partners and Alberta Education. In the spirit of emerging notions of shared accountability and capacity building, the teaching profession invites education partners and the ministry to engage in a review of the accountability system and make improvements that will enable the education system to meet the learning needs of our children and youth in the 21st century.

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