

# EducationNext

## Want Accountability in Education? Empower Parents

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December 16, 2016

The selection of Betsy DeVos for Secretary of Education has exposed longstanding tensions among education reformers who are united in their support for expanding educational choice but divided over the government's role in regulating such programs.

The schism is often portrayed as being between those who support or reject “accountability,” but this isn't quite accurate. The real disagreement is not *whether* there should be accountability, but *to whom* schools should be held accountable: parents or bureaucrats. As Lindsey Burke and I argue in a new report published by the Heritage Foundation and the Texas Public Policy Foundation, educational choice programs like education savings accounts should place the accountability for academic outcomes with parents.

For decades, the term “accountability” primarily referred, in education policy circles, to government regulations intended to ensure quality. That's because most children attend their assigned district schools, which are not directly answerable to parents and function as *de facto* monopolies. As Lindsey and I explain:

*A distinctive feature of monopolies is lack of accountability. Because district schools are not held directly accountable to parents, some policymakers have attempted to impose accountability through top-down government regulations. Yet decades of attempts to regulate district schools into quality have had little effect. Unfortunately, too many policymakers have still come to see centralized government regulations as synonymous with “accountability” rather than an inferior alternative to direct accountability to parents, and have therefore sought to impose similar regulations on choice programs. However, regulations designed for a monopoly system are inappropriate for a market-based system.*

*In a market-based system, producers are held directly accountable to consumers for results. The government sets certain rules against fraud or health and safety standards, but the consumers ultimately decide whether a product or service meets their needs. Likewise, the government could ensure that ESA funds are spent on qualifying educational products and services, but the accountability for results should lie with parents, who are in the best position to evaluate those results. Holding education providers directly accountable to parents creates a feedback loop that does not exist in more centralized, top-down systems like the district schools. As social scientist Yuval Levin has argued, this enables the system to “channel social knowledge from the bottom up rather than...impose technical knowledge from the top down.” This channeling is accomplished “through a process of experimentation, evaluation, and evolution.”*

If we want an education system that makes significant improvements in quality over time, education providers must be free to innovate and parents must be free to choose the providers that work best for their own children. This system evolves over time because higher-quality providers will attract more parents and lower-quality providers will face pressure to either improve or shut down.

However, technocratic attempts to guarantee quality through imposing uniform standards can interrupt this evolutionary process.

### **The Price of Technocratic Accountability**

The technocratic approach to accountability requires that all schools are judged according to uniform metrics, therefore the technocrats rely heavily (indeed, almost exclusively) on standardized test scores, particularly in math and language arts. The technocratic reformers want to use these scores to set a minimum standard, meaning “underperforming” schools would be excluded from receiving voucher funds—or, in the case of charter schools, be shut down entirely—even against the will of parents who still want to enroll their children there.

Let us be clear about what is at stake. The technocratic approach would eliminate a family’s least-bad educational alternative, leaving children worse off “for their own good.” For example, parents may have chosen a private or charter school that did not perform well on the state’s standardized test overall, but the school may have provided a safer environment than the local district school. Or perhaps the school was succeeding at its mission to aid the most at-risk students, but the state’s uniform “accountability” system failed to take its mission into account. The damage done to children who lose the opportunity to attend schools that their parents believe are better than the alternative is incalculable.

We should also be realistic about the unintended consequences of over-reliance on test scores. Although standardized tests can provide parents with useful information about their child’s academic performance, using them to impose uniform standards that so narrowly define “quality” creates perverse incentives that narrow the curriculum, stifle innovation, and can drive away quality schools from participating in the choice program. As Lindsey and I explain:

*When schools are rewarded or punished based on their students’ performance on math and reading tests, they have a strong incentive to divert their time and resources to tested subjects and away from others. A study by the Center on Education Policy found that the time district schools spent on subjects besides math and reading declined considerably after Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which mandated that states require district schools to administer the state standardized math and reading tests in grades three through eight and report the results. In the five years after NCLB was implemented, approximately 62 percent of elementary district schools reported increasing the amount of time spent on English language arts and/or math, and 44 percent reported decreasing time spent on social studies, science, art and music, physical education, lunch, or recess.*

*The narrowing curriculum is particularly alarming because, as Jay P. Greene has noted, recent research has found that “later success in math, reading, and science depends on early acquisition of the kind of ‘general knowledge’ and fine-motor skills learned through*

*art and other subjects.” In other words, a narrower curriculum not only deprives students of having a broader and more enriching education, but also negatively impacts their performance in the tested subjects. “If we narrow education to the mechanics of math and reading as captured by yearly testing,” Greene concludes, “we short-change the broader knowledge that is the key to academic success later.”*

*Mandating a single test exacerbates this phenomenon. Within the tested subjects, schools have a strong incentive to teach the concepts that will be on the mandated test. This incentive to “teach to the test” can result in a de facto curriculum. For example, if a school had been teaching math concepts A, B, and C in grade 7, but the new state test was going to cover concepts B, D, and E, the school would almost certainly drop concepts A and C in favor of D and E, even if the math teachers believe that the original curriculum was superior. Keeping the original curriculum would put their students at a disadvantage on the state test vis-à-vis students at other schools that had aligned their curriculum to the test. This standardization might make sense in a world in which there was one right way to teach math, or at least one right order to teach concepts, but that is not the case.*

Again, this isn't to say that we should do away with testing entirely. As Robert Pondiscio recently wrote, standardized tests should be “used to illuminate and inform parent choice, but not to limit it.” Tests can provide valuable information, but using the tests as the sole or primary metric of performance does more harm than good. What's needed is a more comprehensive understanding of quality that considers the needs of individual students, not just the “typical” student, and that's something that parents are in a much better position to determine than technocrats.

### **The Potential of Parental Accountability**

Parents are interested in more than scores. Parents consider a school's course offerings, teacher skills, school discipline, safety, student respect for teachers, the inculcation of moral values and religious traditions, class size, teacher-parent relations, college acceptance rates, and more. Schools held directly accountable to parents, rather than technocrats, have to take all of these factors into account.

Of course, parents need information in order to make good decisions about their child's education. Fortunately, research has shown that the vast majority of parents from all racial and socio-economic backgrounds are willing to take several steps in order to acquire that information. This is where independent organizations can satisfy parents' demands for information with expert reviews and ratings and by providing platforms for parents and students to share their personal experiences:

*Perhaps the most popular source of expert knowledge about college is the plethora of college ratings providers, such as U.S. News & World Report, Princeton Review, Forbes, Kiplinger's, and Business Insider. These ratings offer prospective students a variety of information about student outcomes, expected earnings, course offerings, campus life, and so on. No rating system is perfect, but parents and students can compare multiple ratings to get a clearer picture of the strengths and weaknesses of*

*different colleges and figure out which features are most important for them. Some outfits even rate the raters.*

*Parents and students are also relying in increasing numbers on user reviews to find the information they seek. Sites like College Times, Students Review, Rate My Professors, and Get Educated provide a platform for students to share information about their actual experiences at the college they attended.*

The K-12 education sector has historically lacked high-quality sources of information about school performance, but to a large extent that is because the vast majority of students attend their assigned district school. With little to no other educational options, there has been little parental need for information to compare competing options. And without much in the way of competition, existing private schools don't feel great pressure to be forthcoming about performance data. However, as states implement educational choice policies, the demand for information will increase and schools that refuse to share their data will be at a competitive disadvantage. We are already seeing parents to turn organizations like GreatSchools.org and Niche.com to find information about schools they are considering and we should expect to see more organizations emerge as demand increases.

In the interim, we should avoid the technocratic temptation to have the government rate schools directly. We have no good reason to believe that the government will do a better job of assessing school quality than private, third-party reviewers. *U.S. News & World Report* may offer crummy ratings, but the solution is having more independent reviewers (as the market has provided) rather than crowding them out with a single government rating system that is subject to political pressures.

Parents are adept at holding schools accountable when they are empowered with choices and armed with information about their options. As Matthew Ladner has shown, Arizona parents voting with their feet closed down low-performing charter schools earlier and more often than state regulators:

*Arizona parents seem extremely adept at putting down charter schools with extreme prejudice. Arizona parents detonate far more schools on the launching pad compared to the number we see stumbling ineffectively through the term of their charter to be shut by authorities (or to give up the ghost in year 14 in an ambiguous fashion). Both of these things happen, but the former happens with much greater regularity than the latter. Having a vibrant system of open enrollment, charter schools and some private school choice means that Arizona parents can take the view that life is too short have your child enrolled in an ineffective institution.*

There is no panacea. There is no perfect information just as there are no perfect bureaucrats or, for that matter, perfect parents. The question before us is how to design a system with imperfect people and imperfect information that will come as close as possible to providing every child with access to a high-quality education. The technocratic approach empowers bureaucrats at the expense of parents, often eliminates their least-bad educational alternatives, and creates perverse incentives that narrow curricular options. By contrast, making education providers directly accountable to parents allows for a more comprehensive understanding of quality that considers the needs of individual students and fosters greater innovation and diversity.

Rather than attempting to design systems that override parental preferences, education reformers should focus their efforts on empowering parents with more choices and work to build institutions that will help them make more informed decisions.

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