

# ACCOUNTABILITY

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Education is far too important and far too expensive **not** to be held accountable. It is of increasing importance to individuals, families, communities and, of course, the economy. The budget for education in the UK for 2024-25 is £88.8 billion and that for defence £56.9 billion. So there must be accountability to those who pay for education and to those in charge of it, as well as to those who are compelled to attend it and their parents. The issue, then, is not whether education should be accountable, but rather what form it should take and what it should cover. The system of accountability that has been in place for the last 30 years has had the unintended consequences which were predicted by T D Campbell in 1976, namely, it will “*distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.*” (1976:49).

The pressure from politicians of all parties in nearly all countries who wish to be able to boast of constant rises in educational standards has become intense, especially since the publication of comparable data from surveys like the Programme for International Studies of Assessment (PISA). Lower than average, or even a slight fall, in scores of tests in maths, science and reading have triggered national soul-searching (causing a moral panic in Germany, inflamed by the media, in the 1980s), and protracted investigations into the probable causes of comparative weakness.

Politicians and researchers then flocked to Finland which until the most recent round of testing has been the most successful country in such comparisons. What they found was an education system without an inspectorate, but which operates a highly selective policy of admission to the teaching profession; and they were able to do so because of the high status of teaching in Finland, which also pays teachers much higher than average salaries. Only the most able graduates are chosen who then complete a higher degree in education, which includes how to teach the subject of their first degree. Their centre for the evaluation of education costs, *pro rata*, less than a third of Ofsted’s budget.

We must also disabuse ourselves of the notions that “*testing of itself drives up standards*” or that “*tests are the only way to hold schools to account and monitor the performance of the system as a whole.*” (Alexander, 2022:49) Robin Alexander goes on to explain: “*testing may **measure** standards but does not in itself **raise** them, except obliquely and temporarily. What raises standards is good teaching.*” (ibid:312. Emphasis as in the original.)

Such pressures are only likely to increase so we need a new system of accountability with the following features:

- it must be *fair* to all types of setting because at present “*around one-in-three of the most disadvantaged schools are labelled as ‘well below average’ by the Department of Education ... compared with just one-in-fifty of the least disadvantaged.*” (Andrews, 2025:8) So it must take account of socio-economic and cultural factors to be considered inclusive
- it must be based on *evidence* from research and not only or mainly from judgements; and evidence on much broader features of education than three subjects to include well-being, physical and moral, the arts, technology etc.
- it must have *strong measures* in place to deal with weak or unacceptable performance by professionals, partnerships, institutions or systems.
- the variety of measures employed must be appropriate to the age, phase, setting and specialism being evaluated.
- it must make reasonable demands of those being evaluated.
- it must be *democratically accountable* so, for example, the myriad types of school must be subject to the same form of accountability.
- it must reinforce all the processes of improvement such as pupil learning, quality of teaching, sampling the whole curriculum etc.
- and, as responsibility for education is shared among central and local government, policy advisers, governors and parents as well as the professionals, so too accountability must be shared.

In sum, far from weakening the present system of accountability, our model would make it more responsive, humane and effective.

Across the Atlantic, Dan Koretz of Harvard University, has long pointed out that standards have not risen and that accountability is not working:

*"Teachers can't do it all—especially teachers in many low-performing schools. This fact is widely accepted in principle, but it is often ignored in practice. We will need to take this far more seriously than we have if we are to achieve the*

*large gains in student learning and, in particular, the big improvements in equity that reformers have promised us for years.*

*The supports we should provide are of three types. The first is better initial training and ongoing support for teachers already in the workplace....The second category is in-school supports ...The third is out-of-school supports; one that has received a great deal of attention in recent years is high-quality preschool, which can improve the long-term prospects of disadvantaged kids."* (2017:26).

The last word on this subject is given to John MacBeath who drew on research projects in seven different countries into connecting leadership with learning. He neatly described the dilemmas professionals face “...*in having to demonstrate a continuous rise in students’ test scores or be subject to sanctions.*” (2009:150) He quoted approvingly a group of European inspectors who argued that external inspection should focus on this central question: how effective is the setting “...*in achieving continuous improvement through evaluating the quality of its own provision and taking action to build on its own strengths and address its weaknesses.*” (2009: 145) He concluded by suggesting that settings need to deal with two forms of accountability, one *internal* that rest on mutual trust and a strong sense of collegiality, and the other *external*, which is “*acceptable and motivating when it moves beyond duty or compliance in external demands and builds on schools’ own intrinsic commitment to essential educational values.*” (*ibid*: 183) We concur.

## References

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