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An Overview of Modern Accountability: The Standards Movement, High-Stakes, and the Reauthorization of the ESEA

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An Overview of Modern Accountability: The Standards Movement, High-Stakes, and the Reauthorization of the ESEA

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Since the release of A Nation at Risk, in 1983, a report decrying the state of public education in America, this nation has increasingly focused on raising standards and accountability for our schools. This article tracks the history of modern accountability, its impacts on education, and contemplates the way forward.

A Brief History of Modern Accountability

A Nation at Risk and the Rise of the Standards Movement

In 1983, Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*. The report, prompted by a fear that America was losing its competitive edge globally, was intended to ensure “a more prominent position for education on the national agenda,” (Bell, 1993). The authors warn that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people” (The National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983, p. 5). The threat, as described in the report, was not only that students were less educated than their parents, but that American students were no longer out-competing students from around the world. *A Nation at Risk* further explains that “more and more children graduate from high school neither ready for college nor work” (NCEE, 1983, p. 12), a mantra that is still repeated today.

The authors of *A Nation at Risk* provided a set of recommendations and reforms intended to bolster educational outcomes for all students in this country. Federal and state investments, and policy in the eighties and nineties stemmed largely from these recommendations and served as the foundation for the growth of our federal accountability system (Crosby, 1993; Gordon, 2003; Guthrie & Springer, 2004).¹ While some have since argued that *A Nation at Risk* was exaggerated, or even a manufactured crisis (e.g., Berliner & Biddle, 1996), it has nonetheless had an enormous impact on education reforms in the following three decades.

President Reagan himself led the implementation of reform in the 1980s. When he entered office he immediately cut federal spending in education by 1 billion dollars, collapsed specialized Title 1 grants, and returned responsibility for education back to the states and local governments. At the same time, he leveraged *A Nation at Risk* to promote the measurement of progress and equity through standardized testing (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2009). Following these initial federal measures were numerous efforts to stem “the rising tide of mediocrity” in US education (NCEE, 1983, p. 5). These include an increase in testing of “minimum competency” skills (p. 20) focused on the *New Basics* (p. 24), as well as the widespread use of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a norm-referenced standardized test (Ornstein, 1993).

George H. W. Bush followed suit and convened a national education summit in 1989, the first since the 1940s. Governors, business leaders, and white house staffers were in attendance but not a single educator (NYSED, 2009). The group was tasked with envisioning a set of education goals that would bolster a “new accountability” comprised of standardized performance outcomes for all students (Furhman, 2004). Emphasizing federal oversight paired with increased accountability and flexibility, the summit produced 6 goals to be achieved by the year 2000 (Bush, 1990).² Complementary legislation, *America 2000*, was drafted in support of these goals. *America 2000* called for national standards, voluntary national assessments in the five core subjects to measure student performance, state and local flexibility and accountability, and increased choice (Department of Education, 1991). After two years of debate, a watered down version failed to gain approval in Congress (NYSED, 2009). Though the legislation failed, it introduced the concept of “systemic reform,” described in detail in Smith and O’Day’s (1990) seminal work *Systemic School Reform*. The theory pushed for aligning curriculum, standards, assessments, teacher training, and resources to generate change “not just in a small handful of schools...but in the great majority” (Smith & O’Day, 1990, p. 235).

George H.W. Bush also led attempts to enact school level reform by instituting policies that focused on curriculum and instruction. In 1991, Bush created the National Council on Education Standards and Testing to weigh the desire and feasibility for national standards and assessments. The Council ultimately recommended the creation of national standards, but allowed states final authority over curriculum and assessment. To aid in this process, funds were distributed to professional organizations to develop voluntary national standards aimed at providing all students with a well-rounded arts and humanities education (Ravitch, 2011). National math standards were completed first and well-received, however the overall efforts fell apart and were eventually abandoned after Lynne Cheney’s successful campaign to discredit what she considered politically biased history standards (Ravitch, 2011).

After witnessing H.W. Bush’s failed efforts, President Bill Clinton opted to withdraw from direct federal intervention, and instead passed the *Goals 2000* (1994) program, an attempt at standards-based education reform. Through the Reauthorization of ESEA in 1994, Title I funds were awarded to states conditionally, provided they set standards, designed their own tests, and held themselves accountable (Superfine, 2005). Unfortunately, states and local education agencies “lacked the capacity to construct and implement coherent systems of standards, assessments, and accountability as mandated” (Superfine, 2005, p. 12). Additionally, many were unwilling to relinquish control to the federal government. Facing increasing political opposition, *Goals 2000* lost its potency and promise by the end of 1996 (Broder, 1996).

In general, the role of the federal government in education in the 1980s and early 1990s remained limited (Superfine, 2005). Except for the establishment of presidential goals, and an increased focus on testing as a vehicle for measuring performance, none of these early reforms attempted to influence teaching and learning directly. These reforms were largely viewed as ineffective because they were initiated primarily outside of the school context, focused mainly on improving inputs, and applied incentives and punishments remotely through federal funding (Salhberg, 2006; Smith & O’Day, 1990). The recurring lack of traction at a federal level created a policy doldrum, which was eventually disrupted by a sudden, strong wind - a “miracle” from the Southwest.

Spotlight: The “Texas Miracle”

Texas is reputed to have an outsized sense of its own place in history. In the case of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002), however, this is a largely undisputed fact. First, the “Texas Miracle,” which occurred within the state between 1993 and 2000 (Blakeslee, 2013), provided the key case study and rationale for expanding high-stakes testing to a national scale. Second, the election of Texas’ Governor Bush to the White House and his swift implementation of NCLB makes clear this was a policy raised in Texas (Butzin, 2007; Lewis, 2002; Zavadsky, 2006). What is often under examined in the national context, however, is the competing research around the validity of Texas’ claims. Most significantly, critical claims attempting to expose the miracle as a “myth” (Haney, 2000) did not emerge substantially until after Bush’s election and were perhaps introduced too late to influence perceptions before NCLB became federal law. This section briefly addresses the controversy over Texas’ implementation of high-stakes testing, and poses evidence on either side of the miracle/myth debate.

The core components of Bush’s Texas Miracle included an increase in the number of schools that performed at acceptable levels, driven largely by a significant increase in schools’ reported test scores, and a narrowing of the achievement gap between middle-class White students and low-income, minority peers (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000). The key report, produced by the RAND Corporation (2000), and led by author David Grissmer, compared NAEP performance for California and Texas and found that “Texas students of each racial and/or ethnic group scored higher than similar California students on all 21 test comparisons” (Grissmer et. al., 2000, p. 71). The Bush campaign immediately latched onto the RAND report and began promoting it through press releases and speeches (Levitt, 2000).

However, in the details of the report Grissmer and colleagues explain that two-thirds of Texas’ performance could be attributed not to a high-stakes accountability system, but to other factors (Grissmer et. al., 2000). Some of these included more resources made available to teachers, the greatest proportion of children in pre-kindergarten in the country, and a low teacher-to-pupil ration (Grissmer et al., 2000). These advantages were largely due to reforms guaranteeing increased resources for schools enacted by Ross Perot in 1984 (Levitt, 2000). What is indisputable is that beginning in 1984 and continuing through Bush’s governorship, Texas evaluated school districts’ performance based on a disaggregation of data into subgroups, including ethnic and racial minorities, and low-income students (Grissmer et. al., 2000; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher 2000; Levitt, 2000). Regardless of other claims about this miracle, the increased focus on the achievement gap and low-income and minority students was a drastic, and much needed civil rights centered, change in policy.

Before the 2000 election concluded, another RAND report was released, however, led by author Stephen Klein, which countered the claims of the first report (Klein et al., 2000). “I think the ‘Texas miracle’ is a myth,” Klein said (CBSNews.com, 2000). Specifically, by comparing improvement in the state exam (TAAS) scores to performance on the NAEP, Klein challenged the validity of these gains. The raw performance data for TAAS was also called into question, as researchers examined who, exactly, was around to take these tests (Haney, 2000). Haney (2000) showed that “only 50% of minority students in Texas [had] been progressing from grade 9 to high school graduation since the initiation of the TAAS testing program” (p. 120), with as many

as 30% being retained in 9th grade, thus avoiding the 10th grade testing that counted for TAAS results.

As Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008) illustrate at a district level, Texas' performance was subject to "gaming" through grade retention and manipulation of "leaver codes" that masked high dropout rates. Amrein and Berliner (2002) further illustrate the illusion of achievement by comparing results in Texas (and other high-stakes accountability states) against overall performance on norm-referenced tests (SAT, ACT, NAEP) and college-credit exams (AP) conducted across America. They find no persistently demonstrated gains in Texas over the years 1986-2001, a period which aligns with the Texas miracle/myth when Texas implemented high-stakes graduation exams. Miracle or myth, the Texas model would soon be applied at scale throughout America.

No Child Left Behind

When George W. Bush was elected in 2000, he brought with him his Texas Plan and from it forged a federal policy that has profoundly changed the landscape of education over the last thirteen years: No Child Left Behind. NCLB introduced high-stakes testing and accountability, providing a system of rewards and punishments for schools, districts, and states that showed, or failed to show, progress. States were given the freedom to set their own proficiency levels, select their own tests, and from those establish their own targets for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (NCLB, 2002). With this freedom came consequences. States would face onerous sanctions if they did not meet proficiency by 2014. NCLB was framed as a civil rights victory for improving education and closing the education gap, but quickly shifted to staunch school accountability practices. Even Diane Ravitch (2011), an original architect of NCLB and now an outspoken critic, yearns for "what could have been" and laments that instead "test-based accountability became our national standard" (p. 21).

After years of increasing pressure and a mounting deadline for proficiency, researchers have generally found that NCLB does not increase achievement in American schools. Zavadsky (2006) noted achievement gains for several large, urban school districts, which she attributes to NCLB. On norm-referenced exams, however, which measure comparative achievement, as opposed to criterion-referenced tests that can be gamed, student performance has remained the same, and in some cases decreased (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006). The wide-reaching implications of NCLB have led to an emphasis on "measurable" data (Linn et al., 2002); a narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy; a reduced focus on subjects like the arts, social studies, and even science; and a high-pressure, test-driven atmosphere in most American schools (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Hursh, 2007; McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 2005).

The original, stated intent of NCLB, of course, was to close the achievement gap and ensure schools pay attention to their economically disadvantaged and minority students. While it is true that the requirements for tracking and reporting "subpopulations" has shifted attention towards minority and low SES populations, a boon to civil rights, these same students are not gaining ground against their wealthier and more privileged peers. Scholars like Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) questioned early on if "investments in better teaching, curriculum, and schooling [will] follow the press for new standards? Or will standards and tests build upon a foundation of continued inequality simply certify student failure more visibly and reduce access to future education and employment?" (p. 1048). Her question was prescient. Research has

shown that the use of testing and mean proficiency scores has placed low-income and minority schools at a disadvantage (Kim & Sunderman, 2005) and that the era of high-stakes accountability has increased inequity in America, not reduced it (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Heilig & Darling Hammond, 2008; McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008; Valenzuela, 2005). NCLB has become what Amrein and Berliner (2002) feared, “an error in policy that results in structural and institutional mechanisms that discriminate against all of America's poor and many of America's minority students” (p. 58).

Conclusion: Where We are Today and What the Future Holds

Presently, Obama has carried on the tradition of NCLB. The Race to the Top Program, Common Core Standards, value-added models of teacher evaluation, pay-for-performance incentives, and continued emphasis on high-stakes testing as the single measurement of success drive America's education system. Yet, thus far, none of these reforms have proven to “fix” what is wrong with our schools. Many of the observations made in *A Nation at Risk* thirty years ago still persist in the dialogue surrounding education reform. A very different movement is now forming to raise alarms about education, but instead it is a mobilization aimed at rolling back many of the high-stakes policies implemented between *A Nation at Risk* and NCLB.

The Backlash and the Reauthorization of the ESEA

States (Governors), Teachers and Schools, Parents

Given Texas' centrality in the grand scheme of NCLB and high-stakes accountability, it is worth briefly noting what backlash looked like as the pendulum swung too far and created a unified agenda against excessive testing. Specifically, Texas' system of high-stakes accountability was “leaving children behind” (Valenzuela, 2005), especially children of color. However, when middle and upper-class parents learned their students would be faced with 15 end of course exams in high school, and that tests would count toward 15% of a student's grade, affecting their grade point average and college admissions, a broad coalition aligned in opposition to the status quo accountability system. Within one year, school boards from more than 880 Texas districts, serving 4.4 million students, passed a resolution demanding a school accountability system that did not rely on high-stakes testing (TASA, 2013).

At the federal level, recent backlash has similarly united two critical groups. States' rights advocates, opposed to federal intrusion, represent one part of that coalition. Anger with Education Secretary Duncan has included claims (Greene, 2011; Izumi, 2013; Jindal, 2014) that the near-nationalization of the Common Core standards violates federal law, which prohibits intrusion into areas of curriculum and instruction. States' rights advocates are joined by a second flank of resistance to reauthorization of ESEA in a form consistent with the status quo. This group consists of a variety of educators, researchers, and pro-Union advocates who believe that high-stakes accountability is either simply (a) a flawed way to measure academic progress, or (b) intentionally designed to facilitate the privatization of public education and the dismantling of the traditional public school system. Recently an open letter coordinated by NEPC was signed by 2,000 education researchers, and strongly urges “departing from test-focused reforms that not only have been discredited for high-stakes decisions, but also have shown to widen, not close,

gaps and inequities” (Open Letter to Congress and the Obama Administration from Education Researchers Nationwide, 2015).

Civil Rights

Though there is a groundswell of support for repealing a number of the accountability provisions in NCLB, many civil rights groups oppose such changes. They point out that “data obtained through some standardized tests are particularly important to the civil rights community,” as they are one of the only sources of information about “disparities in educational outcomes” and are necessary to advocate for “greater resource equity...and fair treatment of students of color, low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners” (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2015, p. 1). For civil rights groups, the collection of data has been key in championing for these varied groups of students. They fear if states are handed back the responsibility, many gains towards equity will be reversed. With so much attention focused on the future of education, and stakeholders continuing to disagree about the role of federal government, it is still unclear what type of bill will emerge from Congress this session. But, as Congress considers the reauthorization of ESEA and weighs the varying concerns of the America public and governing structures, new policies might emerge that reduce the number of standardized tests, include a variety of assessments (e.g., portfolios, performance-based assessment, authentic assessment), and broaden accountability measures (i.e., use equity measures and community-derived goals).

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¹ Examples of *A Nation at Risk* Recommendations:

- higher content requirements for graduation--called the “New Basics”
- adoption in high school and college of more rigorous and measurable standards; increased requirements for college admissions; a longer school day and school year;
- more effective use of time and more time devoted to the New Basics;
- improved teacher preparation;
- modifications to the structure of the profession intended to make teaching more respected and rewarding (NCEE, 1983, pp. 22–29).

² Education Summit Goals:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.
2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.
3. American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.
4. U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.
5. Every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a safe, disciplined environment conducive to learning (Bush, 1990).