

**Performance as a False Promise of Accountability:  
The Case of American Schools**

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I begin with a confession of sorts. For a number of years I have been examining the role that accountability plays in governance, and especially in administration, and all the while I have been consciously -- and quite guiltily -- avoiding dealing with the role it plays in education.

I use the term “consciously” in the sense that I was well aware of how often the term accountability turns up in the rhetoric surrounding education policy debates – and just a simple googling of the word generates many thousands of references tied directly or indirectly to educational issues. My sense of guilt, however, was limited by the belief that I was unlikely to gain any more insight into the problems of accountability by looking into education than what I can achieve through the careful study of its role in other policy arenas, e.g., health care, social welfare, etc.

The invitation to this conference, however, forced me to dive into the vast literature associated with school accountability, especially in the United States where the collective obsession with common (public) school education predates the Constitution. What I have learned in the process has not merely altered my view of education as “just another” area where accountability has been inappropriately and poorly applied as an instrument of governance; it has also provided additional insight into the basic rationalities – what Foucaultians term the *governmentalities* (e.g., (Foucault 1991; Miller and O’Leary 1987; Rose 2000) – that underpin modern governance.

## The Promises of Accountability

Given my placement at the start of this conference, I assumed that my task is to provide some overarching perspective on our general topic of school accountability. And since the assigned title of the presentation indicates that the conference convener was aware of my skeptical views on the subject, I will try not to disappoint.

Let's start by taking note of the obvious: we suffer from a collective obsession with the concept of accountability. Our fixation on this concept is manifest in almost every arena of human activity associated with governance, whether we are dealing with policy arenas, economic sectors, government regimes or the expansive phenomenon of globalization. Rhetorically it has become the universal standard for "good governance" and is the explicit (and driving) motivation behind major reform movements from those seeking transitional justice (e.g., "truth and reconciliation"), more ethical behavior (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility), greater transparency (e.g., Freedom of Information) and more effective and efficient government (e.g., the "New Public Management"). I have gone so far as to argue that it has achieved iconic status among terms of governance (Dubnick 2002), an idea reinforced by the increasing reference in the literature to this "Age of Accountability" (Fisher 2004; Ranson 2003).

What has made accountability so attractive has been its association with a range of highly prized (and universalized) objectives – I will call them "promises" -- which have emerged out of the pervasive and seemingly dominant Enlightenment culture. While its

historical roots, form and content are subject to debate and criticism (Schmidt 2000), the cultural force that is often termed the “Enlightenment Project” has generated a positive view of human potential (an “attitude” in Foucault’s words; Foucault 1983, *cf.* Goodin 1998) that feeds the hope that great ends can be achieved through individual or collective action informed by reason. In that context, “accountability” has emerged as a major artifact of the Enlightenment Project through which many of the most highly valued aims of our civilization – justice, ethics, democracy and performance – can be achieved. These, I argue, are the promises of accountability, and they are outline in Figure 1 below.

### **Four Promises of Accountability**

<i>Promise of:</i>	
<i>Justice</i>	<b>Assumes the opportunity to seek justice in light of some claimed injury will in fact result in justice.</b>
<i>Performance</i>	<b>Assumes that individuals or groups held to account for their behavior and its consequences would in fact perform “better”.</b>
<i>Democracy</i>	<b>Assumes the creation of vertical, horizontal and transparent mechanisms of accountability is the key to democracy.</b>
<i>Ethical Behavior</i>	<b>Assumes corruption and inappropriate behavior can be prevented or corrected through various institutional schemes.</b>

**Figure 1**

In a growing number of contexts, accountability today carries with it the PROMISE OF JUSTICE – or at least the opportunity to seek justice (i.e.,

“settle accounts”) in light of some claimed injury (Borneman 1997; Miller 1998; Rotberg and Thompson 2000; Teitel 2000; Thompson 2001). The context here is most often juridical, and leads to the establishment of formal and informal mechanisms for dealing with everything from the mundane tort claim in administrative courts to seeking justice for crimes against humanity through international tribunals. Of special interest in recent years has been the creation of “truth and justice” commissions in nations that have emerged from years of oppression and strife. Whether we focus on the greatly admired South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission or its less notable counterparts in South America and Eastern Europe, the idea of seeking accountability is central to each as a means for seeking justice.

In the US, the implications of this development are hinted at in the increasing exposure of American public administrators to legal liability under revised doctrines of sovereign immunity. Such exposure has had an impact on expectations, behavior and anxieties about the globalization of that exposure (as reflected in the U.S. government’s reluctance to submit to the jurisdiction of the newly constitution International Court of Criminal Justice).

In other contexts more familiar to students of public sector management, contemporary accountability indicates the PROMISE OF

PERFORMANCE, and assumes that individuals or groups held to account for their behavior and its consequences would in fact perform better (Bolton 2003; Forsythe 2001; Halachmi 2002a; Halachmi 2002b; Ingraham, Selden, and Moynihan 2000; Leeuw 1996; Roberts 1997). This trend is directly reflected in the globalized approach to administrative reform that links the various NPM programs as well as the emergence of what some are calling the “enterprising state” or the “hollow state.” While the U.S. experience with NPM has been somewhat limited under the “reinvention” approach, the increased pressure to focus on performance (e.g., GPRA) and recent proposals for a massive outsourcing of federal government jobs indicate that this will become an even more salient factor in the near future.

On a somewhat broader scale, accountability has become increasingly associated with the PROMISE OF DEMOCRACY. Over the years our standards of assessing democratic governance have shifted from the expansion of individual liberties and citizen participation to the provision of institutional checks on government; accountability, in other words, has moved from a secondary characteristic of democracy to a primary indicator (Behn 1998; Gormley and Balla 2004; Kelly 1998; Laver and Shepsle 1999; Moncrieffe 2001; Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999; Schedler, Diamond, and Plattner 1999; Weber 1999). From the current literature focused on democratization, one gets the impression that the

creation and effective operation of vertical (e.g., electoral) and horizontal (e.g., monitoring) mechanisms of accountability are the keys to democracy. In addition, global reform movements have raised the expectations for transparency in both public and private sector governance. Democratic answerability and responsiveness – always major issues for the American administrative state – is likely to reemerge as a central concern in a global environment. Under the jurisdiction of the WTO and other international trade regimes, many previously closed or obscure policymaking processes – especially those of administrative agencies – are likely to become points of contention.

Lastly, accountability has evoked the PROMISE OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOR or (at minimum) the reduction of corrupted behavior (Beu and Buckley 2004; Burke 1986; Dobel 1990; Dubnick 1998; Dubnick 2003; Dubnick and O'Kelly 2005; Hondeghem and Administration 1998). This is nothing new for the U.S.: for at least the past two centuries, various forms of reporting requirements, codified norms, and answerability have emerged as the means for preventing or controlling corrupt or inappropriate behavior among public officials. Anti-corruption and various transparency projects have had significant impacts – not merely on the behavior of individuals, but on the shape and performance of entire public personnel systems. The globalization of these efforts is

likely to impose additional obligations and constraints on administrative operations.

### The Problem With Promises

What is most troublesome about these promises is that they imply or assume the existence of policy instruments that do not exist as actual tools of government action (Eliadis, Hill, and Howlett 2005). The very idea of achieving any of these promises through the use of accountability mechanisms is a rhetorical rather than empirical statement. What we rely on – that vast toolbox of policy actions we most often associate with accountability, from public hearings to performance measures to holding elections to implementation of freedom of information acts -- are the means and mechanisms by which we hope to render someone more accountable by having them testify or report or campaign or conduct their lives transparently. Thus our rhetorical means (accountability) has become our desired ends. At the least, accountability per se is rendered a secondary or intermediate means to our intended goal of greater justice, performance, democracy or ethicality.

Put briefly, the very idea of “accountability mechanisms” *as policy instruments* is a misnomer. Accountability is not a tool of governance, but rather a condition of being governed. It is the object of the instrument rather than the instrument itself. It is not the demand for answerability,

but the individual's sense of being answerable; it is not the condition of being subject to legal sanctions, but the feeling that one is liable; it is not the imposition of expectations, but the acceptance and submission to what is expected; it is not the assertion of blame, but the cultivation of a sense of blameworthiness.<sup>1</sup>

Without intending to be tautological, it must be stressed that accountability as a tool of governance relies on the *ability* to give an account of one self – a capacity that is not merely social constructed or manipulated through policy designs, but rather is central to core social relationships (see Butler 2001; Butler 2005). Accountability manifests and facilitates our capacity to be governable through the use of account-giving mechanisms that manifest themselves as our *modus operandi* as governed individuals – our governmentality. The error among those who pursue the promises of accountability through instruments explicitly designed to alter behavior is that they inadvertently circumvent (and perhaps unknowingly alter) the very mechanisms that lie at the foundations of modern governance.

Consider, for example, the various policy tools typically associated with New Public Management reforms. Three general sets of tools are usually

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<sup>1</sup> I have made the argument elsewhere that accountability in this sense is the defining characteristic of modern governance, and that the foundations for the modern state are to be found in the establishment of accountability as the governing rationalization – the governmentality – for monarchial rule in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century. This argument is still a work in progress.

associated with NPM: performance measurement, decentralization and transparency (see Lienert 2005; *cf.* Hood 1991). Performance measurement tools involve the reorientation of administrative work toward outcomes and the widespread use of performance measures as the primary basis for assessing that work. Decentralization pushes authority and responsibility downward and outward toward those managers more closely in contact with the customer. Transparency tools put information about the performance of those managers out in the open and subject to scrutiny by the principle stakeholders. Each of these sets of instruments is expressly intended to foster and enhance the quality of public service delivery through accountability. Measured performance, managerial responsibility and openness are assumed to be (both individually and together, depending on the reformer's perspective) necessary and sufficient conditions for accountability, and thus the keys to successful improvements.

While on the surface NPM's "accountability logic" is both attractive (in terms of the values it seems to proffer) and makes operational sense, when we search below the surface we find either little of theoretical substance to support specific initiatives (see Lynn 1998b; Dubnick 2005) or an approach fraught with paradoxes and ambiguities that are not easily resolved (see Hood 1991; Lynn 1998a). The promise of performance, it turns out, is an empty one constructed primarily on the basis of rhetoric

and assumptions. But as important, it is likely to “miss the mark” or, even worse, produce “collateral damage” to the fundamental governance structures critical to the agency or program in question.

### The Case of (US) School Accountability

Unfortunately, American educational reform efforts<sup>2</sup> that come under the rubric of “school accountability” provide all too relevant examples of this point. Despite its strong hold on current US education policy, the explicit reliance on so-called accountability mechanisms to improve school performance is a relatively recent development in the history of American education policy. Historically, the debates over public policies toward education (Cremin 1961; Ravitch 2000) have been focused on the three key questions of who should be taught (the issue of open and equal/equitable access; (Kaestle 1983; Kozol 1991), what should they be taught (curriculum; see Kliebard 2004) and how should they be instructed in those subjects (pedagogy; Gardner 1991; Egan 2002). Supplemental to those core issues have been questions about who should decide (governance; Portz, Stein, and Jones 1999; Ravitch 2000/1974) and how to go about implementing those decisions (management; Peterson 2006; Segal 2004). Underpinning all of those issues, of course, has been the meta-question (tracing back to Plato, at least) of what are the fundamental

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<sup>2</sup> I am limiting myself to the American case, in large part as a result of my lack of knowledge of other cases. This should not be regarded as a claim to any expertise regarding the US case.

aims and purposes of a modern education (see Barber 1992; Brighthouse 2006; Dewey 1966; Postman 1995).

As interesting as the diversity and range of issues associated with American education policy is the fact that this education one of the oldest and most active policy arenas addressed by all three levels of US government on a continuous basis for at least two centuries, if not longer. In all that time, there has been little constitutional debate about the de jure primacy of state jurisdiction over education, and politically the de facto dominance of local policymaking on school matters remains one of the “givens” of the American system. At the same time, national government involvement (typically indirect and distributive rather than intrusive or regulatory) predates the US Constitution and was continuous (if uneven; see Keith 1926) until the 1950s.

Prior to the 1980s, the term “accountability” was rarely heard in the policy debates associated with schooling, and even then it was primarily associated with only one of the major policy issues – that of governance. In contrast to today’s stress on governance structures, the traditional emphasis in governance-focused debates was on issues of “who governs”. In her classic examination of “The Great School Wars” in New York City, Diane Ravitch traces the first confrontation to a debate over education funding in the 1840s waged by the city’s Catholic clergy and follows it

through to the vitriolic disagreements over decentralization that defined the most visible school debates of the 1960s. While the term “accountability” itself is not rhetorically central to these debates, the notion of *political* accountability is strong throughout (Ravitch 2000/1974). These “school wars” often spilled over in debates about district or school system management, and here as well we see questions of political accountability ever present in the background (Hannaway and Carnoy 1993).

Until the 1980s, however, accountability was not regarded as a means for achieving school improvement through the promise of enhanced performance.<sup>3</sup> Although it is clear that a number of cultural, economic and political factors helped set the stage for the school accountability reform movement, the watershed event marking the turn in the US was the publication of a government study, “A Nation at Risk” (Guthrie and Springer 2004; Hunt and Staton 1996). Despite criticisms of both the research and conclusions of the 1983 report (see Berliner and Biddle 1997; *cf.* Guthrie and Springer 2004; Stedman 1995), A Nation at Risk had a significant impact in putting accountability at the center of a reform effort that is now entering its third decade.

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<sup>3</sup> There is one influential historical figure, however, who is known to have advocated the pursuit of school reform through performance measurement. Joseph Mayer Rice, a physician and muckraking crusader for progressive education reform, wrote harsh assessments of public school education from the 1890s through the 1910s, culminating in a publication that called for the application of scientific management principles to education. See Graham 1966.

The post-Nation at Risk reforms took two distinct paths, each making strategic use of accountability. One took its cues from arguments popularized by Milton Friedman and others who focused on making schools accountable through various forms of marketization (Chubb and Moe 1990; Friedman 1962). The possibility of improving performance through market-driven accountability remains an open question (Peterson 2006).

		Standards:	
		High	Low
Stakes:	High	A	B
	Low	C	D

Figure 2

The other adopted the standards approach that ultimately took testing results as performance measures tied to formal assessments that carried major consequences for the school. Widely adopted at the state level and in many major urban districts throughout the 1980s and 1990s, this approach became the centerpiece of the Bush Administration's "No Child Left Behind" policy which became law in 2002.

Of course, many school systems in the US are no strangers to the use of tests or being assessed by the results. In fact, in some districts and schools the evaluations were self-imposed rather in response to some state mandate. But the recent drive for test-based performance accountability

reflects a major transformation that is illustrated by the options presented in the stakes-standards matrix of Figure 2 (from Airasian 1988). In the past, the various uses of performance tests and measures tended to fall into one of the less threatening parts of the matrix. Type D tests were low stakes and involved low standards – typically treated as general information gathering surveys that permitted analysts to identify patterns and possible weak spots in the curriculum that needed to be addressed. Type B assessments – high stakes, low standards – were used determine that at least a minimal level of knowledge or competency had been achieved to warrant promotion to the next level or some form of desired certification (e.g., the GED exams). Type C testing involved high standards, but the stakes were relatively low in that poor performance would not result in serious sanctions, although superior performance could be justly used for “bragging rights.” (The Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) taken by thousands of 11<sup>th</sup> graders in the US is voluntary and challenging for students, and a solid performance by students from a particular school or district is going to reflect well on that institution – but all that is at stake is reputation.)

It is the emergence of Type A performance assessments – high stakes and high standards – that is at the center of the current school accountability movement in the US, and it is the effectiveness of this policy tool to improve the performance of teachers and schools that needs to be

addressed by students of educational (and administrative) reform. The evidence addressing this topic is voluminous, and the accompanying debate is contentious. Evidence of score inflation (in the American idiom, termed the “Lake Wobegon effect”; see Cannell 1988), perverse incentives for educators and students (Koretz 2003), alterations of the “multicultural”/“soft” curriculum (Hess 2004), and other unintended and indirect consequences of this approach are easy to find. And while there are efforts underway to improve the validity and reliability of the performance measurement system (e.g., (Koretz 2003; Porter, Chester, and Schlesinger 2004), the underlying fundamentals are problematic and tenuous at best (Mehrens 1992).

With all that stated, the question remains as to whether the entire project is constructed on a false promise – the promise of performance derivable from accountability. With one exception (Koretz 2002), I found nothing in the literature on school accountability that addressed the absence of an empirically testable theoretical link between account giving behavior and improvements in teacher performance. What was evident, however, is *a strong belief* in that untested promise – a belief that led otherwise sound researchers to engage in their own forms of performative account giving filled with justifications, excuses, rationalizations.

Case in point: In the concluding chapter of a comprehensive effort to assess what they term “The New Accountability” (Carnoy, Elmore, and Siskin 2003), Richard Elmore (on behalf of the team of researchers) states that the

central message of this book is that educational accountability systems work – *when they work* – by calling forth the energy, motivation, commitment, knowledge and skill of the people who work in schools and the systems that are supposed to support them. Accountability systems themselves do not directly “cause” schools to increase the quality of student learning and academic performance. At best, they set in motion a complex chain of events that *may* ultimately result in improved learning and performance. (Italics added) (Elmore 2003, p. 195)

Put another way, the best one can hope for when implementing a so-called accountability system is to tap into the extant account-giving governmentality of those being subjected to these demanding policy tools. If one is fortunate enough to do so in a way that fosters a synergetic relationship, much can be accomplished. Unfortunately, it is just as likely that the effort to inject an external for of accountability will prove disturbing and dysfunctional.

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