

School accountability: Time for a reset?

Peter Cole and Dahle Suggett

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Introduction

Accountability that focuses on what matters has always been central to good government, but the growing complexity of the issues governments need to solve has set new challenges. Consequently, approaches to accountability have moved from ‘command and control’ to outcomes frameworks and, more recently, to a philosophy of mutual accountability. Education systems have similarly changed their approaches to accountability. However, the many hoped-for ‘silver bullets’ (eg, outcomes-based frameworks, national and international testing and hard data reporting) have not delivered the anticipated boost to system improvement. Accountability matters and getting it right is important. It is now time to look more closely at the education value gained from accountability models. Accountability systems in education need a reset.

In this paper, we discuss the effectiveness of the main features in accountability practices and the contribution they make to improving school performance and, in particular, explore what education systems and schools could do to expand and optimise the benefits of accountability practices.

Accountability tied to improvement

Essentially, we have found that the greatest educational value is gained when the focus of accountability is tied directly to the improvement agenda and the evidence-based school and classroom practices and capacity building that make a difference to outcomes. Many high-performing jurisdictions have previously shifted from compliance to accountability, as we have, and now are shifting from hard-edged outcomes accountability frameworks

to a more nuanced accountability-for-improvement focus. This has mainly occurred by placing greater emphasis on internal accountability processes, broadening the focus from outcomes to also include the quality of inputs and ensuring high-quality systemic follow up when schools fall short. **Accountability is not an end in itself.** Accountability in complex systems takes account of interlinked factors with the school as the centre and builds in robust feedback so accountability actively supports improvement.

In the first part of the paper we review the literature on the effectiveness of accountability practices at the macro/global level and within high-performing systems. While there has been massive growth in data collection and data literacy, there is no single proven accountability model. Each of the commonly implemented models has some aspects that are challenged (eg, questioning the validity and fairness of data selected). Trends in accountability models in OECD countries show that external school evaluations are near to universal; school governance practices are focusing more on performance outcomes; and teacher and principal performance monitoring is expanding as an input to accountability.

Four high-performing systems show how a high degree of school autonomy and a judicious mix of external and internal accountability practices contribute to improvement. Their practices are instructive. They

- establish a small number of challenging improvement goals;
- deeply trust their schools and teachers;

- use self-evaluations extensively;
- measure both student and school performance, and the processes that contributed to their performance;
- make their performance data publicly available;
- provide systemic support that is carefully tailored to schools' needs; and
- have governance arrangements and networked structures focused on school improvement.

Expanding the gain from accountability

In the second section of the paper we discuss findings from evaluations of six accountability practices that are commonly implemented by systems and schools, and which are particularly prominent in high-performing systems. These practices are

- external school evaluation;
- internal school evaluation;
- principal appraisal; teacher appraisal;
- public reporting and transparency; and
- school governance.

In the final section we discuss how schools could be better served by their accountability practices. We outline a range of evidence-based actions for improving the effectiveness of accountability practices. We also discuss other 'soft' accountability practices that are most likely to improve school performance. These include a range of person-to-person practices that schools could adopt to strengthen their internal accountability and its links to improved school, leadership, teacher and student performance.

Section 1. What does the macro research into accountability practices tell us?

Accountability systems in education are changing but the evidence is problematic as to the most effective models to pursue.

Global perspective: balancing vertical and horizontal accountability

From the 1990s, major shifts have been from ‘command and control’ centralised management to an array of interlinked administrative processes, for decentralisation of authority and decision making and for open accountability for results. Central government agencies play a very different role in decentralised systems and it is a challenge to establish the right balance of oversight, direction and support (Hodge et al, 2012).

More recently, many countries have made a further shift from a strongly outcomes-focused accountability regime to ones that also embrace evaluation and reflection on implementation processes as well as outcomes – shared accountability for shared results.

Accountability practices are now enabled by big-data systems; standards and outcomes frameworks; performance targets; quality assurance and performance measurement. These are often referred to as vertical accountability mechanisms. These are typified by the data-driven Anglo-American accountability models (Brill et al, 2018; DfES, 2005; Hodge et al, 2012). As well, there are more interactive and lateral or horizontal accountability processes being used: participatory governance; data transparency and information exchange; and peer-to-peer and network arrangements.

Successful systems find the right balance between vertical accountability and more horizontal accountability mechanisms (OECD, 2013, 2016; Schleicher, 2016). These are challenging requirements to meet.

A growing trend is for accountability practices to play a role in systems’ school improvement agendas. Accountability practices are not standalone management or compliance functions nor are they an end in themselves. Systems are exploring how to design and implement a fit-for-purpose approach to accountability that

- helps to produce effective governance;
- maximises gains from school autonomy;
- monitors quality assurance; and
- promotes communication with parents and the community.

The goal is to establish a framework of accountability practices that work in combination to improve school teacher appraisal – increasingly incorporating classroom observations by principals, and peer reviews of lesson plans.

Data from the OECD also contribute to an understanding of the link between accountability practices and performance improvement. The OECD (2016) has conducted econometric modelling of PISA and TIMSS data to determine whether there is a correlation between accountability practices and school performance.

In summary, the modelling of student data revealed that some accountability practices had a positive impact on performance and equity, but only in systems with high levels of autonomy.

Accountability practices are not standalone management or compliance functions nor are they an end in themselves.

accountability matters most for improving performance when it matches the degree and nature of autonomy

The OECD's accountability practices that appear to have had a positive impact on system and school performance were the publication of student data; collaboration between teachers and leaders; internal accountability; student feedback; and use of standardised curriculum guidelines.

The most powerful finding at this 'macro' level is that accountability matters most for improving performance when it matches the degree and nature of autonomy. Indeed, without effective accountability mechanisms, autonomous systems and schools are at a disadvantage. Conversely, systems without degrees of autonomy and with rigid compliance or vertical accountability systems are not high-performing (OECD, 2016; Burns and Koster, 2016a; Snyder, 2013; Hodge et al, 2012).

The notion of complexity has particular implications for accountability models. Understanding complexity is important for reform, as interactions among elements in a complex system mean that a single intervention may generate both positive and negative effects in different parts of the system. For example, public information about school performance might have a very different impact on a school that is thriving than on a school that is struggling to attract students and/or teachers. Space must thus be made to use the constant feedback required to guide complex systems when designing and implementing reforms (Hodge et al, 2012).

Finally, it needs to be noted that the OECD findings are somewhat problematic, given the interlinked nature of the accountability practices, the different contexts of the OECD countries and the nuanced effects of accountability practices on performance. Indeed, the OECD warns against drawing strong conclusions and making simplistic claims on the basis of their findings.

High-performing systems: Autonomy, professional trust and intelligent accountability

Accountability practices can become deeply integrated with improvement. Four jurisdictions illustrate this dynamic process. Others such as Finland, Canada and Singapore are already well documented. We thought a further four examples would be a useful contribution as each has particular characteristics. These are

- London (particularly the success of London Challenge and the changes to accountability currently being considered in England);
- New Zealand (which ranks above Australia on a number of criteria and has highly devolved schools. New Zealand is also reviewing its accountability model).
- Hong Kong (which has sustained high performance; and a high level of professional trust in teachers in an autonomous context);
- Massachusetts (which outperforms USA, is data-driven and provides differential active support for underperformance).

(Appendix 1 provides a brief profile on these jurisdictions.)

The common feature across these jurisdictions is that they are decentralised systems in which high levels of school autonomy are balanced with strong and coherent accountability processes. The mix of accountability levers falls into two broad categories – the vertical or hierarchical processes (like public reporting of data) balanced with arrangements that are more horizontal, or interactive and non-hierarchical (like internal school evaluations).

While these jurisdictions do not have all the features identified below, they do have most of the features combined according to context.

A balance of loose-tight levers for accountability

High-performing systems do not rely primarily on external controls for effective accountability, but ensure accountability is built into internal processes. External levers then combine with internal collaborative processes to support teachers and principals to improve their performance collectively. Fullan (2012) calls this a culture of ‘non-judgmentalism’. Effective external controls need excellent data systems and a commitment to transparency, and central agencies need to support schools to build their internal capacity to improve.

- Hong Kong balances loose-tight accountability arrangements through an ethos that passionately supports minimal government intervention at the school level with structured stakeholder school governance and a tightly specified accountability framework. The accountability framework is also a loose-tight mix, with an emphasis on internal evaluations balanced by external evaluations, led by an expert team.
- London Challenge placed considerable emphasis on setting the right tone for schools being accountable for improving their performance, including rigorous data analysis and performance management of principals who underperformed. This was coupled with a self-improving school ethos, with teacher and school collaboration and a culture of high expectations with ‘no excuses for underperformance’.
- Massachusetts has made a paradigm shift ‘to a new era of accountability’, from a largely tight-compliance

accountability regime to one that has strong and broad accountability measures (ie, more than achievement outcomes) but no external review. The system is also more responsive to schools needs and customises the support it provides.

A small number of positive and challenging goals for improvement

Accountability for improvement is best expressed through a manageable number of positive goals. Research suggests that framing goals and measures for accountability purposes in a negative way (for example by creating a blame culture) might have short-term effects but will have negative consequences in the mid-term to long-term and is an inhibitor to sustained improvement (Fullan, 2012).

- Massachusetts’ ‘next generation’ accountability system has a sharp focus on improving the performance of each school’s lowest-performing students. The same applies to districts that are seen as being as ‘good as their lowest-performing school’. Support for schools and district is proportionate to their needs. These goals underpin system communication, school and district planning.
- New Zealand adopted a new focus on improvements for at-risk learners in 2017 and made that the main evaluative question for that year. A complementary activity by their Education Review Office (ERO) was to look at this question and identify solutions from a national perspective.
- The starting point for London Challenge in 2002 was that London schools were in a crisis of underperformance – and that had to change. The target was to reduce the link between poverty and school achievement.

Irrespective of the range of outputs or outcomes measured, high-performing systems have a clear data management approach.

Teachers are trusted professional experts

Numerous jurisdictions attribute their high performance to the quality of their teachers and, particularly, the high trust by the system and the professional autonomy they are afforded. This directs attention to the qualities needed for a teacher-led, self-improving system, versus the ‘big brother’ culture in systems with a major emphasis on regulation and inspection (Gilbert, 2012).

- Hong Kong has placed the responsibility for improvement largely at the school level. Their policy is grounded in the fundamental belief that professionalism, leadership and collaboration align to produce better organisational performance.
- London Challenge established a high level of practitioner-led professional support that was lateral rather than top-down; the experts were within the schools and respected. The notion that underperforming staff should be challenged but not ‘demonised’ was also a significant change in the professional ethos.

Strengthened internal school evaluations complementing external evaluation

School evaluation processes are the cornerstone of most accountability models. In high-performing systems, there is increasing emphasis on the importance of building internal accountabilities as a means for improving system performance. Internal or horizontal accountability involves stakeholders with non-hierarchical relationships holding each other to account (Timperley and Mayo, 2016). Stakeholders could include students, parents and communities (Burns and Koster, 2016).

Jurisdictions see a new balance, between internal and external evaluations, as deepening schools’ capability to improve and strengthening the system’s responsibility to follow up and collaborate in supporting improvement.

- Hong Kong has a strong internal evaluation component, complemented by an external review program. Its quality assurance framework for self-evaluation encourages schools to collect evidence on school management; teaching and learning; student performance; student support and school ethos.
- New Zealand is seeking to further develop its accountability model according to the belief that a high-performing system is one in which schools have strong internal systems of accountability to their learners, parents and the community, and to their peers.
- Massachusetts does not have an external review process. In lieu it uses a school self-assessment process, based on a comprehensive achievement and growth performance framework and a transparent data regime, to assess the differential support needed by schools.
- In Finland, external evaluations are tools to support and develop schools to reach their full potential, rather than tools of external control or sanction, and they are used in tandem with regular, in-depth internal evaluations.

Measurement is relevant, accurate and highly valued

Measurement is a significant theme in successful systems and in individual schools. Irrespective of the range of outputs or outcomes measured, high-performing systems have a clear data

management approach. They tend to measure the quality of teaching and learning in two ways: standardised tests and/or examinations that provide objective measures of outcomes at a high level of detail; and school evaluations that measure both performance outcomes and the processes that contribute to them.

A recent focus is to strike a balance between securing high-quality information and ensuring any negative implications of monitoring (such as additional workload burdens or pressure) are minimised. In some high-performing systems this is achieved by monitoring poor-performing schools more regularly than high-performing schools. Evidence suggests there is a risk that too great a focus on monitoring can encourage a culture of compliance. Accordingly, many high-performing systems separate responsibility for monitoring outcomes from responsibility for improving performance at an agency level (Mourshed et al, 2010).

Data is made public

The belief in the value of transparency is very strong – perhaps one of the strongest features of accountability approaches in high-performing systems. It is well accepted in most OECD countries that accountability systems should provide timely, accessible and appropriate information to stakeholders on the activities and outcomes the system is being held to account for. Whilst transparency is a common feature of all high-performing school systems, there are differences in the granularity of information published, with some systems publishing data at system level only, while others publish at school level.

Irrespective, the stated goal in high-performing systems is to build a shared understanding of optimal outcomes and use of resources.

- In London Challenge the culture of accountability they established was made possible by the data revolution and their commitment to professional dialogue about performance at school, local authority and community levels. Discussion and planning from publicly available data was a core feature of success.
- Massachusetts operates within the external reporting regime required by the federal government, but according to its own procedures. Their ‘next-generation’ accountability process is based on a fully transparent data regime. The comprehensive data mix includes achievement and growth data measured by a combination of norm-referenced and criteria-based techniques; and indicators that embrace cognitive, wellbeing and developmental dimensions.

Systems customise support for schools to build capacity

High-performing systems can answer the ‘so what’ question that follows a school evaluation. They tailor support according to what the evaluation reveals about a school. These systems also facilitate what researchers call a ‘middle layer’ of support for schools that connects individual schools and teachers to a wider network of support and expertise. Those in middle-layer roles utilise internal accountabilities and collaboration, by making teachers responsible to each other as professionals for their own performance and that of

colleagues (Mourshed et al, 2010; Burns and Koster, 2016a; Burns and Koster, 2016b; Hodge et al, 2012; Smith, 2018).

- London Challenge established a small, fast-moving taskforce that connected individual schools; academy chains; local authorities; school improvement partners; and those in central government, so as to understand the needs of London schools. The task force trialled improvements and rapidly spread successful trials to the rest of the network. This is now established as the Challenge Partners network of schools.
- While schools are now more accountable to authorities, and are subject to increased internal scrutiny, this is matched by professional support.
- New Zealand, through its independent Education Review Office (ERO) has moved to new strategies that support schools in managing their turnaround from low performance when they are unable to do this themselves.

Strategic governance promotes school improvement

While the development of locally based governance arrangements for schools in decentralised systems is an ongoing trend, high-performing systems are adopting models that also embrace collaborative mechanisms among teachers, networks, parents and communities. McKinsey research found that horizontal accountabilities are often present in the most successful school improvement systems, on the assumption that an improving school cannot be driven by

teachers if they are isolated in individual schools or in classrooms (Mourshed et al, 2010).

- London Challenge governance was central to success. Radical structural solutions – such as closing some schools; giving others a fresh start as Academies; forming chains of schools; encouraging Federations and partnerships; and developing Trusts – ensured there was executive power to make effective decisions, structures to hold people and systems to account, and there was access to the best leaders.
- New Zealand is highly decentralised, with a long history of Boards of Trustees being responsible for employment of staff; day-to-day staffing and funding; property management and oversight of the education of all students. In 2017 new legislation has advanced that role and stated that the primary duty of Boards is to ‘ensure that every student in the school is able to attain his or her highest possible standard in educational achievement’.
- Hong Kong has in the past strengthened local governance by shifting the status of the School Management Committee from voluntary to statutory, where all schools were required to establish an Incorporated Management Committee. This has encouraged wider participation of other stakeholders and more transparent decision making at the school level, and gives the community confidence in the quality of school planning and delivery.

Section 2. What do evaluations of common accountability practices tell us?

Common accountability practices: vertical and horizontal

A scan of international system and school accountability literature reveals that the most common accountability practices are:

- external school evaluations (eg, externally managed and resourced reviews, audits or inspections of school performance);
- internal school evaluations (eg, school-managed and resourced evaluations of school performance);
- principal appraisals;
- teacher appraisals;
- public reporting and transparency; and
- school governance

In this section we look in more detail at empirical evidence on the conditions and characteristics for effectiveness of these accountability practices that, in various combinations, are a feature of local and international school systems, and particularly high-performing school systems.




The six accountability practices include examples of both the more common vertical accountabilities and the more emergent horizontal forms.

Caveats on evidence interpretation

There are caveats to take into account in interpreting international and national evidence about the effectiveness of various accountability practices. These include that accountability practices are:

- heavily contextualised and influenced by historical legacies (eg, the degree of school autonomy; the system's expectations for school improvement; the extent of an interventionist reform agenda; the system's past experience with accountability; and schools' willingness to invest time in accountability-related activities);
- very much influenced by the government of the day and may therefore not be driven by evidence as such, but more by general beliefs in the

Table 1: Accountability practice and directions

Accountability practice	Accountability direction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External school evaluation • Principal appraisal 	Department  Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal school evaluation • Teacher appraisal 	Within a school 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School governance • Public reporting and transparency 	Schools  Parents – Community

Adapted from Wyatt (2018)

role of government (eg, conservative governments tend to place more emphasis on school-level autonomy, compliance and ‘small government’, and progressive governments tend to place more emphasis on self-reflection, improvement and system support for reform);

- not implemented in an identical way, with some jurisdictions placing high importance on particular components of the practice and others ignoring or giving scant attention to these components (eg, some jurisdictions require internal evaluation to be a component of an external evaluation, whereas others use internal evaluation to inform the scope of an external evaluation).

Effectiveness of common accountability practices

The discussion below provides a snapshot of key findings from a cross-section of literature that examines the effectiveness of the six common accountability practices identified above.

Effectiveness of external school evaluations

The external school review evidence (eg, Klerks, 2012; Dederling and Muller, 2011; Chapman, 2001; Van Bruggen, 2010) indicates that review/inspection processes that are more likely to promote school improvement have school improvement as the major objective, rather than compliance. Importantly, they analyse school inputs (eg, teaching approaches and the organisation and management in the school) as well as outputs (eg, satisfaction ratings) and outcomes (eg, student test results).

Particular features are that they:

- have a rigorous self-evaluation component;
- focus schools’ attention on those matters which will raise student outcomes;
- provide feedback and recommendations that become drivers for school improvement;
- identify the planning and support schools need to lift their performance;
- follow up review findings by providing customised support and/or intervention (rather than expecting them to reform themselves unaided);
- support schools in need of turnaround to manage the ‘how to’ of school improvement.

Effectiveness of internal school evaluations

The internal school review evidence (eg, Cole, 2010; Wyatt, 2018; OECD, 2009) indicates that school reviews that have a rigorous self-evaluation component are more likely to promote school improvement than are reviews without a strong self-evaluation component.

In essence, school self-evaluation

- should primarily serve as a formative input for school improvement;
- should be a complementary process that has its own outcomes for consideration at the school level;
- can be used to shape the subsequent focus of an external review;
- needs to be genuinely evaluative rather than descriptive – it should draw on valid evidence and include actionable conclusions;

- needs to be a collaborative process that is well managed at the school level and for which leaders and staff need to be well-prepared;
- should be sufficiently formalised so that schools come to regard self-evaluation and reflection as a purposeful professional responsibility to be prioritised, rather than seen as a compliance activity.

Effectiveness of principal appraisals

The most significant finding is that principal appraisal can (indirectly) improve teaching and learning, but for this to happen greater importance needs to be placed on the principal's instructional leadership role, and inputs and outputs, that directly or indirectly have a positive impact on teacher practice and student learning.

Other findings suggest that to be effective, principal evaluations need to

- include multiple measures of performance that emphasise the principal's role in improved teaching and learning;
- provide feedback to guide further development; and
- be improvement-oriented rather than punitive.

Evidence is mixed about whether

- the emphasis given to student learning growth (rather than school organisation and culture factors) when evaluating principals is justified, given that principals' influence on student learning is relatively small and indirect;
- performance payment is a motivating factor for school leaders.

Effectiveness of teacher appraisals

Teacher appraisal takes many different forms and serves a variety of purposes, so the evidence varies depending on how the appraisal is designed and implemented, and its context and purpose. The evidence is mixed as to whether there is a link between teacher appraisal and improved student outcomes, and whether performance pay motivates teachers. However, there is a consensus that appraisals linked to professional learning opportunities are more likely to be supported by teachers than appraisals linked to payment.

Nevertheless, some of the overall conclusions from the literature (eg, Cole, 2010; Condliffe and Plank, 2013; Cowan and Goldhaber, 2015; Goldhaber and Anthony, 2004; Kane et al, 2011; NCEE, 2016) are that

- teacher quality can be assessed effectively using teacher standards;
- appraisals based on well-executed classroom observations identify effective teachers and teaching practices;
- classroom observation judgements on their own are the least predictive method of assessing teacher effectiveness, particularly where observers have not been trained in observation techniques;
- estimates of teachers' effectiveness are more stable from year to year when they combine classroom observations, student surveys, and measures of student achievement gains than when they are based solely on the latter.

The evidence also contains some negative findings. These include that

- high-stakes teacher accountability may unintentionally encourage educators to use a more teacher-centred pedagogical style, and not reward higher-order thinking;

The evidence is mixed as to whether there is a link between teacher appraisal and improved student outcomes

- to be successful pay-for-performance systems must be ‘strategic, quality-focused, fair, flexible, feasible, and affordable’;
- most current performance-pay appraisal models do not meet essential evidence-based design requirements;
- in most OECD countries, students perform similarly, regardless of whether or not their schools are participating in any of the various appraisal models.

Effectiveness of public reporting and transparency

The key issues, as identified in the literature, centre on how testing and public reporting are designed and used. As isolated levers they appear to have no positive impact but, located in a more ‘horizontal’ context and integrated with other incentives and sanctions, public reporting is an essential element in improving performance. However, public reporting alone is unlikely to stimulate improved performance.

Some of the negative findings include that

- publicly reported standardised tests results can have an effect in narrowing the curriculum to the subjects/skills being tested. (While this is seen to restrict a diverse curriculum, others say it focuses attention on policy priorities.)
- standardised tests can encourage gaming the system by schools, through excluding those that are likely to not score well on the tests; but this behaviour might be only in the short term;
- teacher cynicism and workload are emerging as an important issue to resolve in improving the benefits and minimising the risks of public reporting;

- school performance ladders derived from system performance data can create false impressions about ‘good and bad’ schools, as the ranking methodology excludes student academic learning growth and wellbeing data, as well as school contextual factors.

Effectiveness of school governance

The task of effectively governing schools in highly devolved environments is challenging and stretching the capacity of councils to discharge their governance responsibilities effectively.

The evidence on the effectiveness of school governance (Scanlon et al, 1999; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2008; Wylie, 2007; Ofsted, 2002; Dean et al, 2007; Cole, 2010; Ranson, 2011) reveals that

- there is a clear association between effective schools and effective governing bodies;
- the proportion of schools with unsatisfactory governance increases in relation to school socioeconomic disadvantage;
- school councils in disadvantaged areas are less likely to provide strategic leadership, scrutinise policy development and ensure public accountability;
- audit and other compliance regimes are generally in place to meet quality assurance requirements in relation to financial responsibilities, but quality assurance regimes related to other responsibilities of councils generally are not evident or poorly implemented; and
- whilst the general model adopted for school councils operates adequately in the bulk of schools, it generally does not in schools with continuing under-

performance in lower socio-economic communities; and it probably could also be improved for high-performing schools'

Overall findings: what the literature shows

Opaque evidence

A broad finding is that 'hard' evidence of the precise relationships between accountability models and student achievement and system performance is still somewhat opaque. What research does reveal is that student achievement is higher in education systems that have greater school autonomy, provided that autonomy is matched by effective accountability. This signals the need for autonomy and accountability to be intelligently combined to contribute to improving student achievement, and for systems and schools to have an integrated improvement and accountability agenda.

No gold standard

Research also reveals that there is no 'gold standard' accountability model and that each of the commonly implemented models has some aspects that are controversial. Sometimes the controversy is about the validity and fairness of a practice (eg, data selected for evaluation purposes is too narrow) and other times it is about implementation capacity and fidelity (eg, untrained observers being used to rate classroom practices); mostly though, the controversy arises from differences in perspectives.

Although external review/inspection is the most commonly adopted accountability practice, the evidence is somewhat equivocal about whether or not this practice contributes to improved performance. Moreover, it appears that unless some specific features are built into the design of external reviews/inspections it is unlikely

that this accountability practice will have a significant impact on school and student performance.

Compliance mechanisms in the literature tend to be characterised by 'hard data'; 'high stakes'; and 'punitive measures'. Improvement mechanisms tend to be characterised by a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' data, and support and intervention. Research reveals that accountability mechanisms are more effective when their primary purpose is improvement, rather than a hard, results-oriented compliance approach.

Explicit focus needed on improvement

To take this a step further, accountability practices are most effective when they are explicitly focused on supporting schools, leaders, teachers and students to improve, rather than penalising or criticising schools, leaders, teachers and students for their performance or being primarily concerned with compliance matters. While this may seem self-evident, many of the accountability practices reviewed are designed and implemented in ways that place considerable weight on finding out what is not working, and give scant attention to considering what to do to support schools, leaders, teachers and students improve their performance.

In the next section we take up this issue. We consider the question of whether systems and schools would be better served if they put more resources into strengthening particular accountability practices (eg, self-evaluation processes) and reduced the resources going into other practices (eg, external school evaluation). We also consider whether other practices within schools could be implemented in ways that strengthen accountability for improving student outcomes.

student achievement is higher in education systems that have greater school autonomy, provided that autonomy is matched by effective accountability

Section 3. How could schools be better served by their accountability practices?

There are actions schools could take to reset their accountability practices. We know the factors that make a difference to student learning outcomes in schools and the concept of reciprocal accountability. Why not make these central to accountability models?

As the greatest in-school effect on student outcomes is the quality of the teaching and teachers' collective efficacy (Hattie, 2003), accountability strategies that have a direct or indirect effect on teacher behaviour and teaching practice are most likely to be the most effective for improving student learning. Evidence collected by Goddard et al (2015) suggests that strong instructional leadership can create structures to facilitate teachers' work in ways that strengthen organisational belief systems, and, in concert, these factors also foster student learning.

On balance, accountability strategies that are most closely aligned with the work of teachers should shape accountability. These include

1. teacher appraisal;
2. principal appraisal;
3. internal school evaluation; and
4. accurate, comprehensive and accessible input and outcome data.

Although external school review and school governance have the potential for making a major impact on performance, often this is not realised because of shortcomings in design and implementation. Many high-performing jurisdictions have shifted from compliance to accountability and from accountability to improvement.

This has mainly occurred by placing greater emphasis on internal accountability processes.

Why give special attention to particular accountability practices?

The following brief comments outline key reasons for prioritising the four accountability practices referred to above, and lists a number of factors identified in the accountability literature that, if implemented, are likely to further lift the effectiveness of these accountability practices.

Teacher appraisals are important for accountability as they can be used to strengthen the quality of teaching. They can do so by providing feedback for professional reflection and professional development planning; setting expectations; emphasising the importance of collaboration; and building a performance- and output-oriented school culture. Importantly, evidence shows that teachers value opportunities for 1:1 feedback (Cole et al, 2017) and feedback based on evidence gathered through interactive processes like classroom observation.

Principal appraisals can be used to strengthen the learning culture of the school. School leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school. Leadership sets the conditions for teachers to perform effectively in the classroom. Appraisals that help to strengthen the instructional

We know the factors that make a difference to student learning outcomes in schools and the concept of reciprocal accountability. Why not make these central to accountability models?

leader role of the principal in particular can make a significant impact on school, teacher and student performance (Robinson et al, 2008).

School internal evaluations can be used to strengthen teachers' awareness of the school's overall performance, and engage them in discussions about the findings and what the school can do to improve its performance. Research indicates that teachers are more willing and have more opportunities to contribute to and act on the findings of internal reviews/evaluations. The more self-evaluation teams evaluate rather than simply describe performance, the greater the evaluation's impact across the school and the more it is valued by teachers, leaders and other relevant stakeholders.

Public reporting of quality data is essential, as credible evidence on school performance can underpin pressure for improvement and be a source for monitoring the effects of change. At the most fundamental level, information-for-accountability actions focus on the use of information, in and of itself as an instrument of change, as it can directly affect the behaviour of teachers, schools, system authorities and government. Access to a range of data also underpins the impact of other accountability levers – appraisals and school reviews.

Although concerns about the kinds of data collected and how it is used in the public sphere are expressed in the literature, emerging technologies should assist systems and schools to build more comprehensive but accessible data frameworks, which directly inform planning and accountability, address the multiple accountabilities in modern systems and facilitate decision making.

What can be done to make these practices even more effective?

The observations below have been extracted from a wide range of reports on effective accountability practice.

Teacher appraisals are most effective when they improve teaching practice. This is achieved by

- emphasising that the appraisal's main purpose is to support the teachers to reflect on their teaching and take actions that assist them to improve their teaching effectiveness;
- drawing on multiple measures of performance that emphasise improved teaching and learning; reinforce the adoption of proven teaching practices; and require teachers to set improvement goals that are heavily focused on improving classroom practices and building collaboration;
- ensuring teachers receive quality feedback and reflection support;
- documenting short-, medium- and longer-term goals, so that improvement expectations are tangible, explicit and time-bound;
- taking special measures to address, and turn around, unsatisfactory performance.

Principal appraisals are most effective when they improve leadership practice and indirectly improve teaching practice. This is achieved by

- ensuring the person appraising the principal has a deep understanding of the principal role and principal professional standards;
- drawing on multiple measures of performance that emphasise improved teaching and learning; and strategies

for strengthening teaching practices that the leaders are responsible for (eg, systematic class observations; feedback; maintaining an orderly, safe and well-resourced environment; and modelling behaviours and relationships that help build a positive culture);

- emphasising the importance of feedback to guide further development;
- weighting the focus of the appraisal on the relational and strategic aspects of leadership;
- weighting the focus of the appraisal on the leading and teaching, and leading improvement, innovation and change aspects of leadership;
- establishing development goals that are focused on increasing the collaboration between and capability of school leaders and teachers.

School internal evaluations are most effective when the organisational conditions are supportive and staff members and other stakeholders are encouraged to develop the capabilities needed to interpret and draw conclusions from available data. This is achieved by

- making the process sufficiently formalised so that schools come to regard self-evaluation and reflection as a purposeful professional responsibility, to be prioritised rather than seen as a compliance activity;
- having efficient processes for collecting and managing evidence and research to inform policy and reform;
- ensuring teachers' data literacy (ie, they understand how to interpret student and other data);

- building capability for stakeholder involvement and open dialogue;
- collecting evidence from classrooms, students, parents and the broader community;
- ensuring that the report is an evaluation of impact and not simply a description of the school data and practices;
- ensuring the review process is transparent and inclusive, so that staff have ownership of the process;
- identifying whether additional/external assistance is needed to help address evaluation findings.

Public reporting data collected for accountability purposes is most effective when it is timely, credible, diverse and well understood. This is achieved by

- exploring the desirability and feasibility of producing non-technical system- and school-level report cards, based on key educational indicators that are easily understood by schools, parents and the community;
- developing tools to enable schools and teachers to produce real-time data on teaching practices, school culture, and policy implementation;
- developing an information dissemination strategy for the system and schools;
- developing information collection and analysis systems that reduce the workload for schools and teachers.

Some of the above 'accountability improvement' factors could be addressed by jurisdictions redesigning their models, and some could be addressed by schools modifying how they implement their accountability practices.

What other accountability practices could contribute to school improvement?

The discussion that follows is a work in progress. It draws on a range of practices that contribute to school improvement and discusses them through an accountability lens. The ‘revised’ Table 2 includes a ‘new’ category of accountability practices that are based on a commitment to mutual or reciprocal accountability for school improvement.

Mutual accountability arrangements





There is a multitude of accountability relations in schools and a wide range of entry points for accountability. However, opportunities for mutual and reciprocal accountability are often overlooked in the daily practice of many teachers and school leaders, as the value of these forms of accountability is often not appreciated.

While there is substantial evidence to support the efficacy of collaborative teaming it appears that the perceived benefits of working in teams are far stronger

in primary schools than secondary schools (Cole et al, 2017). Indeed, becoming a member of a collaborative team will not, in and of itself, improve teacher performance. As Hattie (2012) observes, ‘not all teachers make the difference’, rather it is teachers who learn about the success or otherwise of their intentions, and act to correct what is not working, that make the difference.

Teachers working in teams are operating in an environment where strong accountability relations can be built. For these relations to be realised, the team needs to be formalising its accountability arrangements. This is done by documenting the commitments that they have voluntarily made to each other. There is strong evidence that team mutual accountability is positively associated with team performance (Faaiza, 2015). Teams that foster mutual accountability are more likely to produce the behaviour changes needed to improve school and student performance, than are teams where participants are not held accountable for their contribution.

Table 2: Accountability practice and directions

Accountability practice	Accountability direction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External school evaluation Principal appraisal 	Department  Schools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School governance Public reporting and transparency 	Schools  Parents – Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal school evaluation Teacher appraisal 	Within a school 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mutual accountability arrangements (e.g. school networks; school federations; professional learning teams, communities of practice, school and community partnerships) 	Within and between schools  Stakeholder collaboration

However, even if teams have not strengthened their accountabilities, they are more likely to identify the need for and to produce change than are teachers working in isolation. Behavioural science attributes this to behaviours being modified because of the proximity and expectations of other team members.

The soft accountability that is described above could be applied to a range of person-to-person practices that schools could adopt to strengthen their internal accountability and its links to improved school, leadership, teacher and student performance.

The discussion below briefly outlines some examples of school and teacher mutual accountability arrangements.

School federation

A recent Victorian federation of schools¹ illustrates the benefits of mutual accountability between schools. This federation is a strategic collaboration between eight government schools within the Local Government Area of Wodonga. Although membership of the federation is voluntary, the schools formalised their commitment to the Federation in August 2016 by signing a memorandum of understanding, which outlines how the schools will work together and the governance arrangements. The Federation works collaboratively to achieve its goals through

- developing a shared vision and working in unison;
- mobilising resources, knowledge and expertise to support what works;
- sharing accountability and creating opportunities for all children and young people;
- enabling and enhancing strategies that work; and

- advocating for equity and policy/practice improvement and investments.

Since inception the focus has shifted from the belief that the primary benefits of federating are economic (eg, economies of scale, local decisions about resource allocation priorities) to the belief that student learning opportunities and outcomes can be enhanced through greater collaboration between schools (eg, shared professional learning opportunities).

The federation is ‘managed’ by the schools and its accountabilities are mostly lateral. Vertical accountability is largely handled by the schools, as they have retained their individual school councils. When agreed, school policies are consolidated into common federation-wide policies.

While this example has not as yet been evaluated, research into the impact of federations in the UK (Chapman et al, 2011) reveals the following.

- Federations have a positive impact on student outcomes. However, there is a time-lag of two to four years between formation of the federation and when their performance overtakes their non-federated counterparts.
- There is no evidence of differential impact on students from different socio-economic settings, with differences in gender or with special educational needs.
- Federating provides more opportunities for continuous professional development, often at reduced cost, across the federation, and at times beyond the federation.
- Federal structures promote increased opportunities for collaboration.
- Collaborative cultures are more likely to accept change and pursue innovation.

- Federations have an economic impact, as they have a larger budget than an individual school. This increases opportunities for income generation; provision of additional services to schools within and beyond the federation; and for streamlining structures to deliver services for less cost.
- Accountability processes for achieving mutually agreed goals are often compromised, as the more pressing need is to build and sustain trust and relationships. This concern with sustaining good relationships can generate a reluctance to holding each other accountable.

While these findings are derived from federations that are very different from the Wodonga model, it seems reasonable to assume that they could also apply to the Wodonga model.

School and community partnerships

School and community partnerships provide a means for establishing mutual responsibilities between the school, parents and their communities. This accountability and improvement strategy is a response to the findings that students who succeed in school are almost always supported by their parents or have access to social capital.

The What Works Program (2013) has published guidance on how to develop a school and community partnership designed to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Typically, the partnership agreements detail the expectations, processes and available support to promote effective partnerships between the school and community. The recommended processes for developing and sustaining partnerships produce accountability

systems to ensure that responsibilities described in the partnership are acted on.

This is a partnership model that could be applied to other cultural groups who may feel disengaged from their school and ‘mainstream’ community.

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are an emerging practice where mutual accountability is essential. The fundamental structure of a PLC is the collaborative teams of educators whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable. The team is the engine that drives the PLC effort and the primary building block of the organisation. DuFour et al (2016) observe that ‘in many schools, staff members are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics – as long as the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process, in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice, in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school.

Professional Learning Teams

Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) provide another example of a practice where with a few changes in how PLTs operate, the mutual collaboration experience by PLT members can be extended so they become mutually accountable.

For example, professional learning teams could be established across the school and be held accountable for

- mutually agreeing on a list of instructional techniques that they need to practice and build into their instructional repertoire;

- making this list transparent by displaying it on the school's professional learning notice board;
- supporting each other to practise and become skilled users of the team's instructional techniques;
- reporting their personal progress to other team members and their team's progress/success to staff; and
- sharing their new techniques with other teams by conducting classroom demonstrations and encouraging classroom observation.

Evidence of their progress and mastery could be gathered via pulse surveys administered to students and staff members, which seek feedback on the take-up and quality of the school's instructional practice.

Conclusion

Some accountability practices work better than others at improving school performance. Some have design features that reflect current best practice, other do not. As a package it seems fair to observe that accountability procedures are 'necessary but not sufficient'.

Data about school, principal, teacher and student performance is needed so schools know how they are travelling and where they should focus their improvement effort. However, data that is restricted to academic outcomes throws little light on why performance is as it is and what needs to be done to improve it.

The two 'big ideas' in this paper – first to prioritise accountability practices that have a strong link with classroom practice and second to strengthen 'person-to-person' and collaborative accountability – are backed by the view that schools could reap substantial benefits if they

- were more forthright about what their accountability needs are

(eg, Is performance data timely, fair, manageable and useful? Are staff able to access capacity building that is tailored to address improvement needs identified through participation in accountability practices?)

- took greater control of their accountability practices

(eg, How aligned are school-wide accountability practices? Is most effort going into the accountability practices that really impact on classroom effectiveness?)

- implemented measures that strengthen teacher collective effectiveness and mutual accountability

(eg, Are teachers being provided with opportunities to spend more time in structured collaboration? How might accountability findings be shared, reflected on and become a catalyst for change?)

As a package it seems fair to observe that accountability procedures are 'necessary but not sufficient'.

Appendix 1: System Profiles

New Zealand

New Zealand has remained a top PISA performer since 2000. It has a highly devolved system that is characterised by increasing diversity and persistent disparities in achievement. Within the same school, young people can experience widely divergent opportunities to learn. This within-school inequity is amongst the highest found anywhere in the OECD, and it is strongly related to disparities in achievement.

New Zealand also has above average OECD ratings for leaders engaging teachers in a culture of improvement and teachers use of student data to improve outcomes. Nevertheless, remedying persistent disparities in achievement remains a major challenge.

London Challenge

London schools have improved dramatically since 2000. At that time there was a sense of crisis about the performance of London schools. By 2013, these schools were outperforming the rest of England in terms of rate of improvement in students' achievements, reducing the links between poverty and performance, and leaders and teacher quality.

London Challenge, the centrepiece of the transformation of London schools, commenced in 2002, involving 1820 primary schools and 417 secondary schools, with 63,000 teachers. The program was supplemented by Teach First and by the Academies program and local support initiatives.

According to those involved and the research community, there is no 'hard evidence' as to the precise causal factors for the dramatic improvement. It is

seen more as a constellation of factors – rigorous school improvement driven by a theory of change; data literacy; leadership and 'intelligent' accountability (lateral, collaborative and cultural).

In the broader context of English schools, the Minister announced in May 2018 a review of the principles of accountability in English schools.

Massachusetts

On OECD data, Massachusetts is regarded as a high-performing system. The United States, as a whole, performs below the OECD average in mathematics, for example, and is among the lowest-performing OECD countries in the subject. However, students in Massachusetts are close to the OECD average. Students in public schools are also high performers in science and reading, and comparable with some of the top-performing education systems in the world. Some features where Massachusetts is different from OECD and US averages include the following. Student data is publicly available – by an estimated 96 per cent of schools; principals have a greater level of autonomy over the curriculum than the US average; and students are subject to slightly fewer tests per month than the US average.

Accountability reform – next generation

Building on the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states have taken the opportunity to revamp their accountability systems. Massachusetts sought exemption from federal law on accountability, and generated a state-based system.

From 2015 to 2018 the 'next generation' accountability system has been developed and put into operation.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) operates through State legislation, The Accountability and Assistance framework is State law and the dimensions for reporting for accountability purposes are well specified, as are the implications of a school's and district's performance level.

The change they have made has been a paradigm shift in altering the balance from what had been largely a compliance monitoring system to a more flexible and responsive process that includes providing customised support to districts. They have signalled it as new era of accountability.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong sits among the consistently high-performing jurisdictions. In 2015, Hong Kong students ranked second in OECD in reading and mathematics and

ninth in science. At least four out of five students are above the baseline proficiency in mathematics, reading and science.

Accountability reform hand in hand with autonomy, governance and quality assurance

There is a strong formal articulation of the balance between autonomy (or school-based management), accountability, quality assurance and governance. The stages of reform since 1997 have strengthened all these components and the system is now high-performing, with autonomous schools and strengthened accountability systems and structures.

The dual emphasis on autonomy and accountability is a 'tight-loose' relationship, with freedom over use of resources within a stated framework of accountability.

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Peter Cole and Dahle Suggett

About the Authors

Peter Cole has provided advice to education systems and schools in Australia and internationally for over 20 years. He has a publications record extending over these years and more recently his research and publications have addressed topical issues in relation to professional learning, school governance, performance pay, school networks, internationalising schools and twenty-first century learning. He was previously a Victorian education department executive with responsibility for school improvement, curriculum delivery and professional development.

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About the Paper

In this paper, the authors discuss the effectiveness of the main features in current accountability practices and the contribution they make to improving school performance. In particular, they explore what education systems and schools could do to expand and optimise the benefits of accountability practices. First, they review the literature on the effectiveness of accountability practices at the macro/global level, and present examples from four high-performing systems. They then discuss findings from evaluations of six accountability practices that are commonly implemented by systems and schools. Finally, they outline a range of evidence-based actions schools could use to improve the effectiveness of their accountability practices.

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