Comment on "Reform, Resistance,... Retreat? The Predictable Policies of Accountability in Virginia," by Frederick M. Hess, in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy: 2002*, Diane Ravitch, Editor.

Comment by Iris C. Rotberg

I began as a research psychologist. When I changed fields and went into public policy, I assumed that I could apply the research methodology, but not the subject matter itself, to policy formulation. Now it has come full circle: I find that the research methodology used in psychology has little relevance to policy studies, but the psychological and behavioral analyses have become especially salient.

In formulating policy, lawmakers and educators pay little attention to how human beings might respond to any given intervention. Frederick Hess's paper on the politics of accountability presents an excellent and highly informative analysis of how those responses affect the likelihood that an accountability plan will be implemented as originally intended.

I would like to suggest that how human beings respond to test-based accountability will determine not only whether or not it gets implemented but also, if implemented, whether it ultimately helps or hurts children. That is, the tests themselves can have little impact one way or another. What matters is how educators, parents, and students change their behaviors in response to the tests and whether these behavioral changes are productive or counterproductive. My comments will focus on educators.

I assume that people on both sides of the test-based accountability debate share the same goal: to strengthen academic programs and reduce the gap in achievement. Testing programs will affect the way students are sorted. Those who support test-based accountability believe that it will provide the clarity and structure needed to enable students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to participate fully in educational opportunities. Those who oppose it believe that basing promotion and graduation decisions on test scores will magnify the adverse effects of poverty and unequal educational resources, thereby increasing the gap.

Educators' behavioral changes in response to the testing programs will play a major role in determining whether or not the programs produce positive outcomes. A small amount of research has been conducted on some of

these behavioral changes; for most, there is anecdotal evidence or conjecture. I will give a few examples of arguments on both sides, beginning with potentially positive changes.

First, test-based accountability plans might change behavior by giving states and school districts a greater incentive to direct their energies to those students who have previously been ignored. Thus, if teachers and principals are held accountable for test results, they might devote more attention to low-achieving students. Moreover, the increased public attention given to student achievement might encourage policymakers to target additional resources to these students. In recent interviews with policymakers and researchers about the Bush administration education proposals, one respondent noted: If reporting disaggregated scores provides accurate information, which, in turn, "directs money to the right places, it would have a positive effect on educational equity."[108]

Second, the plans might change behavior by encouraging school systems to focus on the subject matters that are stressed in the tests and thereby reduce the time devoted to less academic activities. A respondent described it this way: "If schools are given sufficient time to develop standards, realign curricula, and ensure that teachers are trained in the new requirements, test-based accountability requirements could improve programs. In the absence of these elements, testing will weaken programs because it will force teachers to teach to the test because the consequences for not improving test scores are too high."[109]

Third, the tests might change behavior by providing the structure that many teachers, particularly those with less expertise, need to present material competently. For example, a respondent commenting on the Bush administration education plan stated: "Some teachers need structure, especially those coming from the second and third tiers of teacher preparation or those teachers who are teaching out of field, which happens quite often in the poorest inner-city schools. In these cases, standards and tests may be helpful in getting them through. In theory, the idea is not to have those kinds of teachers. But we don't have a deep bench when it comes to teaching."[110]

The argument, therefore, is that behavioral changes in response to test-based accountability plans can potentially strengthen education, particularly for those students who are at greatest risk of falling behind. On the less optimistic side, many believe that test-based accountability will provide incentives that are counterproductive—for the same students.

First, the pressures on educators to raise test scores might encourage them to make decisions that are not necessarily in the best interest of the child. These decisions affect student assignments, grade retention, and dropout rates. For example, students with disabilities or language-minority students might be assigned to special programs to exclude them from the test results rather than to improve their educational experience. Or, conversely, principals and teachers might be reluctant to recommend their highest achieving students for gifted programs in other schools because they would then lose the benefits of those students' high scores. There also are incentives to retain students in the grade immediately preceding the test-administration year, a practice that raises average test scores but also increases dropout rates, particularly if students are retained in middle or high school. Recent reports have described this problem, for example, in Kentucky and Texas—states that emphasize test-based accountability.[111] This practice was not invented in response to the current round of test-based accountability. Similar practices were reported in Ireland as early as the 1940s and in China and Kenya more recently.[112]

Second, the incentives implicit in accountability systems might lead to different responses from educators in low-income communities than they do from educators in higher income neighborhoods, thus exacerbating the current two-tier system. For example, teachers in the lower scoring schools might experience more pressure to teach to the test and to exclude subject matter that is not directly relevant to the test than teachers in higher income schools. Teachers in the more affluent schools might feel they have the flexibility to continue to teach a wider range of subject matter and even, as reported in Hess's paper, get permission to substitute other tests for the ones that are part of the accountability plan.

Third, test-based accountability, particularly when combined with low salaries and difficult working conditions, might discourage the most qualified teachers and principals from entering and remaining in the profession. There already are reports of educators choosing not to teach in the grades tested or in low-income communities, where the pressures to raise test scores are strongest.[113] Shortages of teachers and principals have become more severe, particularly in the lowest income communities. In comments on the Bush administration education proposals, one respondent stated: "The result will be that the best teachers will leave teaching or perhaps migrate to private schools where they are not subject to this. Why would the best and brightest want to deliver a script?"[114] The point is that accountability plans cannot be more or less effective than the educators who ultimately must carry them out. Another