

## COMMENTARY

# What Are We Doing To Our Schools?

'ACCOUNTABILITY' MAY BE A POLITICALLY CORRECT SLOGAN,  
BUT IT'S A FLAWED REFORM STRATEGY

By Irls C. Rotberg

**A**ccountability has become the politically correct slogan for educational reform. It would be risky for any candidate (either for a superintendency or the presidency) to question the wisdom of proposals to distribute rewards and sanctions to school systems based on students' test scores. Yet these campaign proposals would have significant negative consequences.

tell us mostly about which students take or are "excused" from taking the tests, test familiarity, and cramming for the test. For example, school districts that place special education or language-minority students in separate programs, and therefore exclude them from the tests, artificially raise their average scores in comparison with jurisdictions that mainstream these students. Further, a district with a high dropout rate will have inflated test scores because only the

higher-achieving students remain in school to take the test. Under those circumstances, the district simply is not serving lower-achieving students, yet its scores give the impression that it is a superior district. In contrast, a district that retains a high proportion of students in school is at a disadvantage in the test comparisons.

**T**he proposals also would establish counterproductive incentives by placing states and school districts under pressure to give higher priority to raising test scores than to the best interests of students. Districts would have a strong incentive to exclude potentially low-achieving students from taking the test by assigning them to special programs. Moreover, extensive evidence shows high retention and dropout rates in the grade immediately preceding the test-administration year, a fact that artificially inflates test scores. In a recent report, for example, Marguerite Clarke and colleagues at Boston University present data from Texas' highly publicized testing program suggesting that many students are being retained in 9th grade, the grade before the Texas As-





Ken Condon

First, the average test score of a state or school district is more closely linked to poverty than to anything else: Typically, the higher the proportion of low-income children, the lower the test score. Moreover, states with high poverty rates, on average, spend substantially less on education than do wealthier states. An accountability system based on test scores, therefore, risks taking resources from poor jurisdictions and giving them to the rich. If that were to happen, lower-income children would be the losers.

Moreover, the rewards and sanctions would be based on flawed measures of performance. Standardized-test scores tell us little about the strengths or weaknesses of schools. In addition to poverty, the scores

assessment of Academic Skills is administered. Thus, anticipated test results, as well as the results themselves, appear to work together to increase grade retention and decrease high school graduation rates.

These problems would occur regardless of the sophistication or uniformity of the

used to measure performance. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests may give the illusion of objectivity, but no sampling design can assure representativeness when jurisdictions have dramatically different rates of student dropouts, grade retention, assignment to special programs, and exclusions from the test. In

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and that it does not supplant  
what otherwise would have  
been spent by states and locali-  
ties. Federal programs can ac-  
complish little if states and  
localities reduce overall educa-  
tion expenditures, or funding  
for low-income schools, by re-  
placing their expenditures with  
federal grants.

**T**hird, the American pub-  
lic should be given an  
accurate and realistic  
assessment of the cur-  
rent status of U.S. edu-  
cation and the public policies re-  
quired to make a difference:

- Do not tell the public that our schools have failed or that student achievement has declined. Those conclusions are not supported by the evidence. Do not cite the findings of international test-score comparisons as an indicator of the success or failure of our schools. These studies are seriously flawed. They tell us little about the quality of education because countries differ substantially in a range of variables the international studies do not, and cannot, control—for example, student selectivity (overrepresentation in the sample of the highest-achieving students), the proportion of low-income students in the test-taking population, and the country's practice with respect to the inclusion or exclusion of low-achieving students, language-minority students, students with disabilities, vocational or apprenticeship programs, and

Campaign 2000

# Notes to the Next President On Education Policy

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contributions or pay high private school tuition—haven't heard the message.

• We should be realistic about what federal education programs can and cannot accomplish. The federal government currently accounts for only 7 percent of the approximately \$330 billion spent each year on public elementary and secondary schools. The United States has nearly 15,000 school districts. A federal program funded at \$200 million, for example, provides an average of less than \$14,000 per district, an amount that would not support even one additional half-time teacher for the entire district. Here, too, it would be wise to focus federal resources on a limited number of well-funded programs that serve schools and students with the greatest needs and avoid the proliferation of underfunded programs—each with its own bureaucracy and paperwork requirements—that promise more than they can achieve.

• The federal government also should ensure that its funding results in additional spending on education, that it is targeted to intended beneficiaries,

entire regions of the country.

• Do not assume that the latest quick fix will produce academic benefits. "Connecting" every student to the Internet or ending social promotion will do little to improve the overall quality of education. Moreover, we need a lot more evidence before we can conclude, for example, that charter schools will have a significant effect on student achievement, that they will, indeed, include "all" children, and that they can be staffed by an inexhaustible supply of qualified teachers. Or that vouchers (the code word is "free choice") can be financed in meaningful amounts and will result in an ever-expanding supply of private schools that offer high-quality education at modest tuition.

Perhaps most important, we need more information before we can be confident that charter schools and vouchers will not encourage racial, ethnic, and religious homogeneity within schools as well as increased isolation of language-minority children and children with disabilities.

• Do not accept the current conventional wisdom that states and school districts should hold teachers' "feet to the fire" in an

effort to raise students' standardized-test scores. Test-based accountability systems often do more harm than good because they establish counterproductive incentives. They turn schools into "cram courses" designed to raise test scores rather than to educate students; they encourage schools to assign children to special education programs in order to reduce the number of low-achieving chil-



Laura Costas

dren taking the test; and they are likely to discourage the most qualified teachers from remaining in the teaching profession, particularly in low-income districts. Moreover, even reported test-score gains, or losses, typi-

cally are spurious and do not tell us about the quality of a child's educational experience. They tell us instead about cramming, familiarity with the test, and, if we look behind the data, which students (low-achieving, special education, language-minority) do, or do not, take the test.

• Do not support education policies without assessing their potential impact on our ability to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. If "reforms" are to strengthen education, they will need to contribute to a

ble for the broader problems in our society. One in five children lives in poverty. The aggregate income of the poorest 20 percent of U.S. households is one-third the aggregate income of the richest 1 percent. Given the high correlation between student performance and socioeconomic status, we should not blame teachers for the resulting educational problems.

We will not raise student achievement by substituting rhetoric for a realistic assessment of our educational problems and the policies that will

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school environment that attracts the best teachers. We will not attract these teachers if salaries are noncompetitive or if education policies create excessive or contradictory demands. Many teachers will move to schools with better working conditions or leave the teaching profession altogether. Our lowest-income children will be hurt the most.

• Do not hold schools responsi-

serve to address them. Proclamations that "all children can learn to a high level" will not make it happen and, instead, obscure the need for well-financed programs focused on the lowest-income school districts. We can begin by giving the American people accurate information about the major commitment needed to make a difference in students' academic achievement. ■