CHAPTER 4

Standards for What? Accountability for Whom? Rethinking Standards-Based Reform in Public Education

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With the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, public schools across the United States are for the first time required to show evidence that all of the students they serve are learning. For those unfamiliar with the ways in which the educational system has operated and functioned prior to the enactment of the new law, this may come as a surprise. For many years, the great shame of public education in the United States was that large numbers of students graduated from school possessing limited skills and knowledge. The new law is intended to ensure that all students demonstrate measurable evidence of academic achievement, and the slogan—Leave No Child Behind—dramatically captures this intention.

NCLB AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

As noble and important as such a goal might seem, accomplishing it will be far more difficult and complicated than President Bush and sup-

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porters of the law may have imagined. Across the country, there are thousands of schools that have never shown any evidence that they can educate the majority of children they serve (Maeroff, 1988). Under the new law, such schools will be labeled "failing," and if they are unable to improve within a fairly narrow time frame, they face the prospect of being shut down or being subjected to various negative sanctions (Schwartz & Robinson, 2000).

For the most part, the most troubled public schools have traditionally served the children of the poor. This is especially true in large cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but it is also true in small cities like Compton, Poughkeepsie, and East St. Louis. In fact, wherever poor children are concentrated, especially poor children of color, public schools are almost always very bad. Of course, part of the problem is that owing to local financing, considerably less money is spent on the education of poor children (Barton, Coley, & Goertz, 1991), but it is also true that poor children are more likely to attend schools with fewer qualified teachers and inferior facilities (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Middle-class and affluent children have almost always received a better education, one designed to ensure that they would retain and perhaps even surpass the achievements of their parents. But for poor children, especially minority children in the inner city, public education like public housing and public hospitals has rarely been associated with exceptional service and excellence. Rather, public schools that serve the poor have been more often associated with a litany of problems—high dropout rates, low test scores, discipline problems, and the like—and rarely have they been a source of hope and genuine opportunity for the children served.

Given the dismal state of so many public schools, the President's call to "leave no child behind" would seem to be a bold and significant development in educational policy. How could any reasonable person oppose the idea that schools should be required to show some measure of success in carrying out the function for which they were created and produce evidence that children are learning? Such a goal is after all a central element of the "great promise" of American education, a promise that was first enunciated by Horace Mann, one of the early architects of public education from Massachusetts. Mann called for schools that would serve as the "great equalizer of opportunity" and "the balance wheel of the social machinery." He envisioned this great leveling process occurring in a "common school" where the children of farmers and bankers, commoners and aristocrats would be educated together (Cremin, 1988, pp. 8–10). His vision called for schools that would ensure that an individual's status at birth would not determine what he or she

could accomplish or become later in life. It is a vision and promise that has been intimately connected to the American Dream, and it was so powerful a source of inspiration that over time it led this nation to be the first modern democracy to create a system of public schools (Katznelson & Weir, 1985).

TAKING THE EASY WAY OUT

Advocates of the new law argue that it aims to make this promise real (Schwartz & Gandal, 2000). In compliance with NCLB, states across the country have adopted new academic standards and assessments designed to hold schools and students accountable for academic achievement. To ensure that a high school diploma is regarded as a legitimate indicator of educational accomplishment to colleges and employers, students in several states are being required to pass "high-stakes" exit exams prior to graduation. In the lower grades, students will not be allowed to advance from one grade to the next unless they have demonstrated minimal competence on standardized tests. Additionally, schools with high rates of failure will be targeted for various forms of intervention, and face the prospect of being taken over by state governments if they fail to improve (Elmore, 2003).

In many states, the new standards constitute a significant increase in the academic expectations that students are required to meet. They are rigorous, demanding, and not surprisingly many schools and districts are struggling with the challenge to meet them. They are struggling in part because they have never been expected to use high academic standards as a basis for teaching all children before, and they are struggling because many schools lack the essential ingredients to meet the needs of the children they serve. For example, schools serving recent immigrants who speak little or no English are held accountable to the same standards as schools serving native-born English speakers. The same is true for schools serving poor children with significant social and psychological needs (e.g., housing, nutrition, health, learning disabilities, etc.), and schools that are faced with shortages in essential resources (e.g., certified teachers, capable administrators, adequate facilities and learning materials). In the name of equity and the goal of "ending the tyranny of low expectations," all schools are being held to the same standards.

For obvious reasons, schools that were struggling before the new law was enacted are under the greatest pressure. Such schools are now required to demonstrate steady improvements in tests scores on state

exams, or they face the prospect of being subjected to various sanctions imposed by the state. Under the new law there is no provision to provide assistance to struggling schools or to ensure that they will receive help developing the capacity needed to meet the needs of their students. Instead, what they will receive is pressure, and lots of it. The operating assumption behind the new law is that pressure and in some cases public humiliation are effective ways of forcing schools to improve.

In contrast, most schools serving affluent student populations begin this process with designations as higher performing schools. They too must produce evidence of incremental improvements for all of their students, but they are less likely to be threatened with punitive sanctions. In several areas of the country, it is now customary for local newspapers to rank school districts by the test scores of students. In most cases, the districts serving the most privileged students are at the top, whereas those serving the poorest children are at the bottom of the test scores ladder. This is hardly surprising. In fact, school rankings often follow a form of race and class profiling—if you know the demographic composition of a school or district, it is easy to predict where that school or district will fall on the rankings. This was true before NCLB, so it is not surprising that it is true now. However, never before have policy makers construed labeling schools and districts as "failing" as a strategy for improvement and reform (Noguera & Brown, 2002).

The advent of standards-based reform has drawn greater attention to the so-called achievement gap: the gaping disparities in student performance that correspond closely with racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences among students. Such patterns have been evident in school districts throughout the country for many decades, but because NCLB requires that test scores be disaggregated by race and released to the public, the issue has garnered considerably more attention recently (Noguera & Akom, 2000). Gaps in achievement are particularly noticeable in affluent suburban districts. As their scores have been released to the public, it has become evident that many communities that have had a reputation for sending large numbers of students to elite colleges and universities have a far worse track record with their minority students, even when there are very few of them and most of them are middle class (Noguera, 2001a). The achievement gap is now widely regarded as one of the major challenges confronting public education today, but once again, relatively little is being done to provide concrete assistance to the schools that need the most help.

As a result of NCLB, we now have high standards imposed on students but no standards for schools. State governments have not set min-

imal standards that schools must meet with respect to the qualifications of teachers, the state of facilities, or access to learning materials. Moreover, there is no effort afoot to ensure that schools provide students with an education that meets the new high standards. Although students are required to pass rigorous exit exams, schools are not required to ensure that all students have been adequately prepared so that they have the opportunity to learn the relevant material.

The irony of this situation warrants close examination. It would be analogous to the Food and Drug Administration setting standards for product quality by punishing individuals who consume faulty products, or the Federal Transportation Commission setting new standards for air safety and enforcing them by punishing passengers for security violations at airports. The absurdity of such an approach is obvious when we apply the logic of standards and accountability to other areas of service. Yet there has been relatively little outcry over the fact that students—who have no control over the quality of education they receive—are the primary individuals held accountable under the new law. In Florida, where numerous reports have exposed severe overcrowding in schools serving the poorest children, the state has taken the bold step of placing letter grades on the front of school buildings so that all can know a failing school even before they enter. Of course, the state still allows failing schools to operate, but they pretend that by labeling such schools with a "D" or an "F" on the front door (I actually visited a school with a "FF" grade in Miami), they have taken tough action. In Florida and several other states, governors and state legislators have taken credit for raising standards without doing anything to improve the quality of education provided to students in schools where they know conditions are most severe.

Similar arguments can be made about the accountability strategy built into the new law. We now have tough systems of accountability for students, but none for adults—teachers, administrators, governors, and legislators. I recently asked the superintendent of a large urban school district who is a leading proponent of standards-based reform how many adults in his district would lose their jobs if hundreds of students did not receive a diploma in June 2003. With a puzzled look he responded, "Perhaps a principal or two from one of the failing schools." I posed the same question to members of the state legislature and to some of the individuals who have been the architects of these reforms, and on each occasion my question was met with the same puzzled look. How could it be that the only constituency that is being held accountable and that stands to lose something vital—namely, a high school diploma—is made

up of students, whereas the only thing at stake for most adults is the possibility that they will be embarrassed by low test scores? At a time when teachers and qualified administrators are in short supply in many areas of the country, it is unlikely that mass firings could be used as a threat for pervasive failure. I would argue that given the difficulty involved in improving schools, such a strategy would not even be fair or productive. But how fair is it that students—the only constituency that lacks lobbyists and representation in the state legislature—are being held accountable by the new law? Perhaps it is because some students are actually regarded as expendable.

At the high schools I work with in Boston, where in some cases half to two thirds of the seniors will be denied a high school diploma, I hear anger and resignation among students and teachers. I speak with principals who readily admit that most of their students have not been adequately prepared to pass these exams. I also hear from anxious parents who hope desperately that at the last minute public officials will come to their senses and reverse the policy as they recognize the folly of their actions and the devastating consequences that will befall many students.

However, it now appears increasingly unlikely that there will be any reversal in policy. When the results of the last exam were released in March 2003, Massachusetts State Superintendent of Instruction David Driscoll announced triumphantly that 90% of high school seniors had passed the exam, and he boldly declared victory (Feddeman & Perlman, 2003). Boston College researchers, however, pointed out that the actual percentage is closer to 78% if one calculates the passing rate by measuring how many students entered the ninth grade in 1999, and how many will graduate with diplomas in 2003. Moreover, even if we accept the state's figures, the results mean that 1 out of every 4 Black students, 1 out of every 3 Latinos, and just over a third of all special education students will not receive high school diplomas this year (Haney, Madaus, & Wheelock, 2003).

Similar practices with similar results have been obtained in places like Texas and Chicago where high-stakes exams have been in existence longer (Hubert & Hauser, 1999). Mass failings in these places have not led to backpedaling or a change of course from policy makers. It is not a stretch to conclude that because the casualties of this policy are overwhelmingly poor children of color, politicians are generally not troubled by the outcomes. Even though large numbers of students will leave school lacking the skills and certification to obtain meaningful employment, there has not been much concern expressed. Certainly, some wring their hands and publicly lament the failure of so many students.

but many others seem to find solace in their belief that only the undeserving—the lazy, the unmotivated, and the dumb—have been affected.

DOING THE RIGHT THING: ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THE TOUGHEST SCHOOLS

Although politicians, corporate leaders, journalists, and others have generally hailed standards-based reform as the tough medicine needed to cure the ills of public education, those closer to the neediest schools and students have typically been less supportive about the effects of the new law. As thousands of students in states like California, Massachusetts, Texas, and Florida are faced with the prospect of being denied high school diplomas, a growing chorus of opposition is emerging to what some regard as a gross injustice against poor students. Will our society truly be better off if thousands of students are denied high school diplomas, unable to go to college and significantly less able to find decent jobs? This is one of many questions that the advocates of NCLB have not answered, except through their silence.

Opposition to standards-based reform should not be equated with a desire to return to the past, to the time when it was possible for students to graduate with meaningless diplomas, or to when too many schools showed little interest in promoting higher levels of learning and achievement. Rather, many of those who oppose the new law and the way it has been implemented want to see state governments do more to assist struggling schools and would like to see measures of achievement broadened beyond a narrow focus on test scores.

One frightening result of NCLB is that in pursuit of the goal of raising test scores, "failing" schools have been compelled to enact a number of measures that have actually undermined the education and social well-being of students. Faced with cutbacks caused by declining state revenues, many schools and districts have been forced to eliminate subjects such as art, music, and even science if they are not covered on standardized tests. Some have eliminated field trips, recess, and physical education to increase the amount of time available for test preparation (Kohn, 2000). In secondary schools, several students have been required to enroll in test preparation courses, some of which meet for nearly 2 hours per day, in the hope that such a strategy will make it possible for more students to pass the exams. Rather than taking steps to ensure that students in failing schools are taught in enriched learning environments and exposed to creative and effective teachers and stimulating curricula,

the narrow pursuit of higher test scores has reduced the focus of education to test preparation in too many schools.

What many advocates of standards-based reform fail to see is that it is possible to raise academic achievement and improve public education without compromising the quality of education that children receive. For this to happen, the scope and purpose of NCLB would have to be broadened considerably so that a variety of approaches could be taken to address the needs of poor children and struggling schools. In the remaining pages, I outline what some of these approaches might include in the hope that the debate over standards-based reform can move beyond critique to consideration of measures that might genuinely make a difference.

1. Respond to the nonacademic needs of poor children.

There are a few things that we know from research about the achievement gap. For example, disparities in achievement correspond closely with other disparities that exist in our society (Miller, 1995; Noguera & Akom, 2000). The students who are least likely to achieve in school are the students from the poorest families—the kids who are least likely to have educated parents, stable housing, or adequate health care. Put more simply, the achievement gap is a reflection of the socioeconomic gap, the health gap, and the gap in opportunity.

If we want to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn, we must ensure that their basic needs are met. This means that students who are hungry should be fed, that children who need coats in the winter should receive them, and that those who have been abused or neglected receive the counseling and care they deserve. If the commitment to raise achievement is genuine, there are a variety of measures that can be taken outside of school that will produce this result. For example, removing lead paint from old apartments and homes and providing students in need with eye exams and dental care are just some of the steps that could be taken. This may seem obvious, but although the new law is called No Child Left Behind, many of these needs have been ignored, and consequently many children are being left behind.

Even without a major change in social welfare policy, it should be possible to use several successful models of full-service schools to provide poor students with the services they need (Dryfoos, 2001). Such schools provide a variety of services to the children and families they serve, including preschool, after-school programs, health services, and job counseling for adults (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Given that schools

that serve the poorest children are most likely to need assistance in providing these kinds of services, policy makers will have to take the lead in forming partnerships with social service agencies. It is not fair or reasonable to expect schools to meet these needs or to do this work on their own. This is a wealthy nation, and as in other affluent societies, it should be possible to ensure that all children here have access to the services they need so that they can concentrate on learning in school.

2. Hold state governments accountable for maintaining high standards in schools.

Just as we do for the maintenance of highways and the public water supply, we should ensure that common standards of service are upheld at all public schools. Unlike the state of Florida's government that affixes letter grades on schools as a symbol of the quality of education provided there, state governments should be required to ensure that no students attend schools staffed by unqualified teachers or learn in buildings that are falling apart. State governments should be required to establish minimal operational standards for public schools, and they should be held accountable for the quality of education provided to all children.

Historically, there has been very little focus on quality control in public education. Students who are behind academically are typically placed in remedial programs, some of which are supported by Title I funds from the federal government, but it is rare for districts to ensure that the programs are effective and that there is evidence that students are actually being helped. These programs must be evaluated so that we can be sure that we have not relegated the neediest students to programs that cause them to be further behind and fail to address their academic needs.

3. Focus on the problems facing low-performance schools.

Low-performing schools tend to be racially segregated, and they generally serve the poorest children (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Such schools also tend to have high turnover among staff, particularly among administrators. At many high-poverty schools in California, large numbers of teachers are uncredentialed and lack training in the subjects they teach (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Low-performing schools also tend to suffer from a dysfunctional culture where low expectations for students, lack of order and discipline, and poor professional norms are common.

These schools need help, not humiliation. They need policies that

ensure they can attract and retain highly skilled professionals. State governments in partnership with colleges and universities should devise intervention strategies to assist struggling schools. There is much research available on high-performing, high-poverty schools (Jerald, 2001; Sizemore, 1988) and on programs that have proven successful for raising achievement (Traub, 2002). Drawing on this research, intervention teams should be deployed to work closely with teachers, administrators, and parents in failing schools to create conditions that lead to improvements in teaching and higher levels of achievement. Such an approach will not lead to immediate improvement in achievement measures but should begin the process of gradually turning low-performing schools around.

4. Make schools more responsive to the parents and families they serve through the enactment of systems of mutual accountability.

One of the reasons schools in middle-class communities tend to perform well is that the parents they serve are empowered to insist upon high-quality education. Middle-class parents tend to have a clear sense of what a good education is, and they generally have the wherewithal to make sure that their children get one, even if it means pulling their kids out of mediocre or failing schools as the last recourse (Nocera, 1991). NCLB contains provisions to allow parents to remove their children from failing schools but without funds for transportation or access to information on superior alternatives. Poor parents are much more likely to defer to the decisions made by the professional educators who serve them, and they are more likely to accept the schools they are assigned to even if they are not happy with the education their children receive (Noguera, 2001b).

Poor parents constitute a captured market in public education; they typically have no option or choice but to accept what they are provided. When educators know that a constituency has no ability to challenge how it is being served, where does the incentive come from to serve it well?

The only way to ensure that poor parents are treated as valued consumers is for districts to devise strategies to ensure that the concerns and satisfaction of parents are taken into account in operations. Ideally, this should take the form of systems of mutual accountability in which the responsibilities of schools, parents, and students are clearly spelled out so that all can be held accountable for their role in the educational process. Some schools have attempted to do this through the formation

of site councils that involve parents in decision making (Noguera, 2001a), and through the formal contracts that establish norms and expectations for school officials, parents, and students and are signed by all parties.

5. Implement diagnostic assessment to strengthen the link between teaching and learning.

In most states, standardized tests are used for ranking purposes; test scores are used to make comparisons between students and schools, not to figure out how to help those in need. Typically, state exams are given in the spring and the results are not available until the fall. By this time, students have been assigned to new teachers, and in some cases, new schools. Such an approach limits the possibility that data generated from the tests could be used to provide teachers with an accurate sense of the academic needs of students. It also makes it difficult to use data from the tests to make modifications in instruction.

Diagnostic assessments administered at the beginning of the school year can provide schools with a clearer sense of the strengths and weaknesses of students. Such an approach would make it possible for schools to monitor student performance over time and to measure the performance of students in relation to established standards. Provided with a clearer and more accurate sense of the learning needs of students, schools would be in a better position to make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction, and how best to utilize supplemental resources (e.g., Title I funds, grants, etc.). Schools should strive to ascertain how much academic growth occurs over a course of a year so that they can determine whether the approaches they utilize to support teaching and learning are effective. This requires treating assessment as an ongoing process of evaluating student knowledge and ability, not through the administration of more standardized tests but through meaningful analysis of student work.

It is common for teachers to assert that it is not fair to expect them to produce dramatic gains in achievement in a single year. Even the most gifted teachers cannot take students who start the year reading at the third-grade level and bring them to the ninth-grade level in a year. However, all teachers should be able to demonstrate that they add value to the knowledge and skills possessed by students, and that during the course of a school year their students experienced some form of academic growth.

This kind of accountability requires not only a change in assessment but, even more important, a change in the way we typically think about

teaching. Too often, teachers see teaching and learning as disconnected activities. This is especially true in high schools where teachers are regarded as subject-matter specialists and perceive themselves as hired to cover material within a set curriculum. They see their job as teaching the material and the students' job as learning it. Such an approach to teaching makes it unlikely that teachers will take responsibility for the learning that is supposed to take place in their classrooms. It also reduces the likelihood that significant gains in achievement will occur, because teachers see their work as only remotely related to student learning outcomes.

A substantial body of research shows that higher levels of learning and achievement are most likely to occur through improvements in the quality of teaching (Ferguson, 2000). When teachers are fully invested in learning and when they base their effectiveness on the academic growth of their students, they will routinely look for evidence that the instruction they provide is enabling their students to acquire the knowledge and skills deemed important. When teaching and learning are connected in these ways, the ultimate evidence of teacher effectiveness and student learning is the quality of work produced by students. Ideally, this should also be reflected in higher test scores and a variety of authentic indicators of learning and achievement.

6. Build partnerships between schools, parents, and the communities they serve.

There is a vast body of research that has established the importance of parental involvement in raising levels of academic achievement (Epstein, 1991). Yet, although the advantages of constructive partnerships between parents and schools are clear, it is often the case that such partnerships have been difficult to bring about in low-income areas. In poor communities, tensions and strains often characterize relations between parents and schools, and distrust and hostility tend to be more common than cooperation in pursuit of shared goals.

Given the importance of parental involvement, it is imperative that schools devise strategies to establish partnerships based upon respect and recognition of mutual need. Several programs, such as the Comer school reform model (Comer, 1987), the local site councils in Chicago (Wong, Anagnstopoulos, Rutledge, Lynn, & Dreeben, 1999), and the use of formal contracts between parents and schools, have proven effective as strategies for engaging parents in constructive partnerships with schools. Such approaches should be encouraged as a matter of policy, both to address the captured-market problem described previ-

ously and to develop the kinds of relationships between parents and schools that are essential for academic achievement and the welfare of students.

Beyond parents, schools serving poor children and communities will often need other sources of help in meeting their needs. In many communities, help could be provided by private businesses and corporations, community organizations and nonprofits, churches and local government—organizations that have a vested interest in the health and well-being of the communities in which they are located. Some of these organizations may have no prior experience working with schools, and they may need to be persuaded to play a role in supporting public education and to do more than simply make token donations. To address the lack of resources that is common to urban public schools, strategic partnerships with other organizations should be developed to provide schools with technical support, material resources, and personnel to assist schools in meeting student needs.

A partnership developed in Pomona, California, provides an excellent example of how this can be done. This district straddles two counties—Los Angeles and San Bernardino—and because of its shared jurisdiction, it had been neglected for years by both local governments. About 10 years ago, the district decided to purchase a large shopping mall that had been abandoned and had become an eyesore. Using school bond money, the district purchased the property to generate revenue and to enhance its ability to help the families it serves. Serving as the anchor tenant, the district then began to lease property at the mall to private businesses and nonprofit organizations that provide child services. It also decided to locate the district personnel office at the mall to recruit new teachers. Today the mall is a vibrant youth services center. It generates revenue for the district, and the service organizations housed there provide services to youth and families in the district.

This kind of strategic partnership requires vision and imagination. It also requires creative use of resources, and know-how to successfully manage relationships between public and private organizations. A recent publication of the National League of Cities (2002) encourages local governments, especially municipal leaders, to play a greater role in developing these kinds of partnerships. Similar calls have been made by researchers and policy makers who recognize that improving public schools will require a higher level of civic engagement than previously observed in most communities (McLaughlin, 2000; Stone, 2001).

CONCLUSION

The movement for standards-based reform has succeeded in getting educators and policy makers to focus their attention on the need for schools to find ways to raise student achievement. There is evidence that it is forcing schools that were previously complacent to become more serious and coherent in how they approach teaching and learning; for the first time, many school districts are being forced to prove that they can educate all of the children they serve. These are not insignificant accomplishments. However, pressure alone will not produce substantial improvements in public education, particularly in communities with the greatest concentration of poverty. Schools serving poor children need help, and thus far the advocates for standards-based reform have not displayed a willingness to provide the help that is needed.

The six recommendations that I have outlined represent my estimation of the type of policy initiatives and concrete assistance that is needed by schools in poor communities. In putting these recommendations forward, I have avoided the impulse to suggest changes that are necessary but politically unviable. For example, if we were serious about leaving no child behind, we would make sure that all children in the United States would be covered by health insurance. As basic and important as this need might be, I recognize that, at the moment at least, there is no political will to bring this needed reform about. Given this unfortunate political reality, I have tried to be pragmatic and I have limited my recommendations to initiatives that are politically feasible. That does not mean that making them happen will be easy, but I do believe that it is essential to bring these issues into policy debates about standards and accountability.

Historically, when politicians contemplate how to "fix" public schools, they seize upon a fad or gimmick—a quick-fix solution that they hope will miraculously change public education (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Among policy makers, the most popular reforms of the day include charter schools, vouchers, and testing. Less well known but no less influential are more substantive reforms, such as small learning communities and phonics-based approaches to teaching reading, that schools have pursued to solve their problems. Although some of these strategies and others have merit and have shown promise in some schools, no reform measure is likely to produce the wholesale improvement that is desired. This is because the educational challenges faced by poor communities are not merely educational—these challenges cannot be addressed in a vacuum. What is needed is a more comprehensive and ambitious