

Be All You Can Be: Tackling The Accountability Dilemma

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One of the most complex balancing acts for independent school leaders today is what I've come to think of as the Accountability Dilemma: The challenge of assessing and conveying the performance of the school and its teachers. Increasingly, trustees, especially those who work in corporate settings, have been pressing school heads for hard numbers about student outcomes and teacher performance. They want specifics ("metrics," "benchmarks"). They want to know how the school compares to its competitors—and, almost always, why the school doesn't move more aggressively to dismiss weak teachers.

Faculty take a very different view. Most are used to a strong tradition of teacher autonomy and have little experience being supervised or evaluated in any sustained, significant way. They respond to the prospect of a new or firmer system of performance appraisal with, if not fear and loathing, anxiety and bristling. School leaders are caught in the middle. They see the rationale and the shortcomings of both trustees' demands and teachers' resistance. Many have tried to finesse the differences, but the "ducking and dancing," as one head calls it, is becoming ever more difficult. The time has come to tackle the Accountability Dilemma head-on.

Trustee Questions

Board members who seek metrics and benchmarks are applying to their stewardship their own expertise and frames of reference—their workplaces are increasingly data-driven—but they are also echoing a stance prominent in the national debate about public education, namely that schools are not businesslike enough, that improving their performance requires corporate management methods. These methods include, among other steps, setting specific, quantifiable goals wherever possible, including for teacher performance, rewarding financially teachers who achieve these, pressing poor performers to improve, and dismissing them promptly if they fail to do so.

The tenacity of this approach is puzzling, given that its actual track record in schools is worse than poor. I have previously outlined in this magazine some of the key flaws in applying corporate assumptions to education.¹ They begin with purpose: An independent school must be sufficiently businesslike to survive, but its goal is not profit, it is to raise the young, and so it most resembles not a company but a village, a religious institution, or, in some ways, a family. Like them, it depends

crucially on continuity, not constant innovation. It attracts people with a strong service ethic who choose to spend their days with children and adolescents—and who are not highly motivated by money or by a competitive desire to outperform colleagues.² Its most important student outcomes transcend test scores and college admission lists, and its key inputs—teachers' daily work—involve enormously complex interactional variables and must be assessed qualitatively more than quantitatively.

Because they know all this, heads of school can chafe at the emphasis on measurability, and their frustration is increased when trustees' underlying interest proves, as it often does, to be shallow. At a recent administrators' conference a longtime head said, "My board members care about our school, but they don't really want to understand the essence of good teaching. They just want to be able to say that we score well." Despite this frustration, most school leaders agree that the trustees' questions demand attention. The *kind of answers* board members want may be inapt, but their questions themselves are not. Improving accountability has never been more important, both on pedagogical and practical grounds.

The Best Case for Accountability

Within the field of education, the past thirty years have seen the growth of a large and deep knowledge base about teaching and learning. We've discovered much about the brain, about the different ways students learn, and about the impact of different approaches to instruction and assessment. Thoughtful practitioners and researchers have built a strong case that teaching is not an ineffable, idiosyncratic art form but a professional craft, one that can't be reduced to rote prescriptions but must be rooted in evidence-based practices. They call for greater accountability, but not for corporate approaches. The questions they pose about performance are: "What are you trying to accomplish and how do you know you're accomplishing it?" and, "Given what you started with, what progress was made?"³ Similar to what trustees ask, to be sure, but these advocates' interest is not in, say, ranking and paying teachers based on student test scores or in counting a school's Ivy League acceptances. It is ultimately in whether students can demonstrate their ability to truly apply the concepts and skills they're being taught.

Although the knowledge base on which this approach to accountability rests is robust, it is widely ignored in the

independent school world (more on this below). There is, however, a second basis for improving accountability that is widely acknowledged there: enrollment. Well before the financial crash of 2008, independent schools were concerned about affordability, worried that ever-rising costs would reduce the numbers of families able and willing to pay tuition. Heads and trustees everywhere were searching for ways to restrain cost growth and to highlight the “value proposition”—to demonstrate that the tuition was worth it. The crash intensified this challenge and hurt enrollment at independent schools across the U.S. Five years later, especially in areas where the economy remains weak or public schools are seen as a viable option, the need to emphasize the value proposition remains acute. At this writing, scores of schools, both day and boarding cannot stay full without altering their admissions standards. As one boarding school head puts it, “We can’t just say anymore, ‘Trust us, we’re excellent.’ We need to be able to convince people that the experience here—especially our teaching—is worth our tuition.” The value proposition includes factors other than teaching skill (small class and school size, close relationships with faculty, greater opportunities for leadership, among others), but given parents’ anxiety about preparing their children for a fast-changing, uncertain world, excellence in teaching seems likely to loom larger and larger.

Faculty Resistance

Compelling though this necessity may seem to school leaders, they know that when they begin to take concrete steps in this direction they will encounter resistance from faculty. As noted above, the implementation or strengthening of a supervision and evaluation system almost always raises teachers’ anxiety and frequently their opposition. The new head of a lower school says that many of his faculty became tearful and some were “frankly terrified” after he announced the need to create such a system. The opposition is often whispered, but it can also take a more assertive form. When I recently asked the faculty at a top secondary school if they thought its performance appraisal should be improved, a history teacher said, with some scorn, “We hear about so-called ‘best practices,’ but what each of us does here is totally unique. No one can judge what I do, and I can’t judge what anyone else does.” None of his colleagues offered even a mild objection, even though his view flies in the face of the evidence. When I pressed them on this, several agreed that he might have stated things too forcefully, but most shared his basic view.

School leaders resent faculty resistance to supervision and evaluation just as they do trustees’ thirst for metrics and benchmarks. Indeed, faculty attitudes can strike them as not just naive but hypocritical. “Teachers spend all day making judgments about students’ performance to help them grow,” a

middle school division head complains, “but they don’t want anyone to do this for them.” This distress may seem readily understandable, especially given the enrollment challenge noted above, but so, too, is teachers’ reluctance. A key reason? So many are so unused to having their teaching assessed or their growth promoted in meaningful, sustained ways. The plain fact is that large numbers of independent schools have weak traditions of performance appraisal and professional development.

Weak Traditions

One of the clearest ways to see this weakness is to contrast independent schools with high-performing public schools. I’ve consulted in hundreds of both. Every one of the public schools has a formal system of supervision and evaluation; a good thirty percent of the independent schools do not—they have nothing in place. The rest tend to have systems that are, on paper, similar to the public schools’. These often call for supervisory evaluation of new teachers annually during their first several years and then every three years thereafter, or a multi-year cycle that alternates supervisory review, peer review, and teacher-chosen professional development activities. The difference is that the public schools, almost without exception, actually implement the system. In independent schools the implementation, in my experience, is often spotty, the actual supervisory input rarely vigorous. I’m always surprised when I encounter an independent school that has a thorough, fully implemented program of teacher supervision and evaluation. Similarly, when it comes to building capacity, independent schools typically offer their teachers many fewer hours of professional development each year than do top public schools.

It’s not that all public schools’ systems are ideal. Far from it. Their implementation is by no means always stellar, and even in high-performing districts many educators find the evaluation process too bureaucratic and the professional development uneven. But the best public schools not only hire teachers who are already trained in pedagogy (teaching methods, not just curriculum), they offer them both continuing oversight of performance and continuing opportunities for advanced learning about instruction and assessment (again, not just about curriculum). Independent schools, by contrast, hire many people with little pedagogical training, offer them comparatively little supervision, evaluation, and professional development, and tend to concentrate little of what they do offer on classroom methodology.

Because of these differences, the pedagogical repertoire of independent school teachers is typically narrower—often considerably so—than that of their peers in the best public schools. The teaching I get to see is rarely poor, but it’s often pedestrian. Nonetheless, students generally do well. They ought

to. There is abundant evidence that non-school factors (socio-economic status, level of parents' education, family stability, and the like) play a much larger role in most children's achievement than do school inputs.⁴ And independent school students are the most teachable in America: they are typically bright, motivated, and well-behaved, and they typically come from supportive, middle- and upper-middle-class families. Plus, they are generally placed in small classes and their teachers generally have small pupil loads. Given all this, the essential question is not whether the outcomes are good, but whether they are as good as they should be. Is the school, in short, being all it can be? From my perspective, few independent schools can make this claim, nothing would strengthen them more, and tackling the Accountability Dilemma head-on offers a unique opportunity to do so.

Three Keys

Seizing this opportunity begins with renewing the school's pedagogical foundation via a clear philosophy of instruction, a strong emphasis on building teachers' capacity through focused professional development, and a thorough approach to supervision and evaluation that emphasizes regular assessment. These steps invite faculty resistance by seeming too tough and risk board skepticism by seeming too soft. Both the resistance and skepticism need to be addressed directly.

Virtually every independent school has a mission statement and a strategic plan with a vision, but few have a clear philosophy of instruction. Many raise money to invest in supports for teaching (facilities, technology), but few concentrate resources *directly and effectively* on teaching itself—that is, on improving teacher performance and growth. Many highlight the individual attention they offer students or their commitment to educating the whole child, but few enunciate and implement a particular approach to instruction that brings these generalities to life. There are, of course, exceptions, schools that adhere to a specific set of educational beliefs that drive both instructional methods and curriculum: Montessori schools, for example, or those that espouse the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. And some schools have a specific instructional focus of their own (expeditionary learning, say). But most independent schools give their teachers wide leeway to teach what and how they please. Like the history teacher above, faculty treasure this autonomy (and the substantial freedom from critical review that accompanies it), but, too often, its implicit underlying assumption is, like his, "We're all excellent and don't need help to improve in our craft." It provides no platform for continuous, lifelong learning, for the development of reflection and critical thinking, or for collaborative growth—three of the very "21st century skills" that independent schools proudly claim to be instilling in students.

A coherent philosophy of instruction that operates across an entire school is easiest to establish and sustain when the institution is small and serves younger children. The larger the school, the more divisions, students, and faculty it has, the harder coherence is to achieve. And whatever their size, secondary schools and divisions are almost always driven by the content of academic disciplines and pay less attention than lower and middle schools to a direct focus on skills, both for students and for teachers. Fortunately, "coherent philosophy" here does not mean "doctrinaire rigidity." It means two things: a *broadly shared understanding of how children learn and of what and how we teach them*; and a *primary focus on the outcomes we seek and the sequence of learnings that lead to these*. It doesn't call for strait-jacketing teachers, but it doesn't leave them all free to do solely as they please. It fosters flexibility within certain limits and it assumes an ongoing collective effort to broaden and deepen the craft of teaching.

This effort depends on healthy, focused professional development to help faculty fulfill the school's philosophy of instruction. As noted above, in-service programming is a comparatively scarce commodity in many independent schools. Many smaller ones simply can't afford much of it. But better-resourced ones often don't spend their money in ways that would bring the best results. Some, for example, still offer sabbaticals. Another feature of the tradition of autonomy in independent schools, these can be delightful for the few individuals who receive them each year, and I know some school heads who feel that sabbaticals help in retaining top teachers. But they do little to build the classroom skills of a whole faculty. For the price of two sabbaticals a school can fund a rich, in-depth series of in-service programs or send sizable groups of teachers to high-quality trainings. With regard to the latter, a common practice is to permit individual teachers to attend conferences and workshops of their choosing. Even when the events are stimulating, they rarely contribute to collaborative capacity or coherence. Much anecdotal evidence argues that both individual and collective development are enhanced when teachers attend in groups. Here again, coherence doesn't call for a straitjacket. But a school that wants to build or strengthen its instructional purpose and practice would align its professional development activities with its philosophy of instruction, offering its teachers not full free rein but options within a defined framework.

The third component of building coherence and capacity is an effective program of supervision and evaluation. Such a program straddles the boundary between promoting growth and appraising performance. Like the former, it offers help. Like the latter, it requires measuring up. There is a voluminous literature on teacher supervision and evaluation, and many models for

schools to adopt, ranging from shallow performance checklists to complex, in-depth rubrics. Most of the best call for a combination of input by both supervisors and colleagues, along with the teacher's own self-evaluation, and concentrate on four areas of performance:

1. Teaching skill. The specific components assessed will depend on the school's philosophy of instruction, the grade level, the purpose of the specific lesson, among other factors. The key is that there be specific, observable behaviors and practices (more on this below).
2. Unit design. Can the teacher explain clearly the goals and structure of the unit of which the lesson is a part?
3. Assessment and feedback. What kinds of pre- and post-tests does the teacher use to gauge students' progress? How does she communicate with them about their progress?
4. Collegial behavior. How does the teacher's department or grade-level team describe his performance as a colleague and collaborator?⁵

Whatever the school's philosophy, state-of-the-art teaching requires competence in each of these four areas. And state-of-the-art supervision and evaluation depend on actually supervising and evaluating. Simply designing a new system will, by itself, achieve nothing. It must be implemented in a consistent, sustained way.

Managing Resistance

Easy to say all this. Not so easy to do. The more entrenched a school's tradition of autonomy, the weaker its history of professional development, supervision, and evaluation, the more its students have been seen as successful, the likelier faculty are to resist these recommendations. I have explored the challenges of managing resistance to school change at length elsewhere.⁶ Here I will note that our reaction to change depends primarily on its meaning to us and that we almost never adopt a planned change without a combination of pressure and support.

Change invariably causes ambivalence and resistance. We often hope for change—mostly that *other people* will change, but also that we ourselves can master our shortcomings and increase our strengths. But humans are fundamentally pattern-seeking creatures with a powerful impulse toward predictability. Pattern-seeking is hard-wired into our brains and vital to our well-being: to understand our world we depend on continuity, on the validity of what we have learned—and how we have learned it. For our lives to have meaning we must be able to find a predictability in events and relationships. *Meaning* here involves both a logical, cognitive understanding (“I see what you mean”) and a psychological, emotional attachment to people

and ideas (“teaching a child to read means so much to me”). How we react to any innovation thus depends above all on what it means to us, that is, on how it affects our understandings and attachments.

In the minds of those who seek to improve schools changes like those I've outlined mean *growth* and *development*, but their early meanings to teachers are more likely to be *grief* and *threat*. We are bereaved when a loved one dies, but also when an assumption we take for granted is devalued. We can't just discard familiar understandings and powerful attachments because someone tells us to.⁷ Rational explanation alone will not suffice, and people cannot be ordered out of grief.

Change also threatens competence. Improving teacher performance, would threaten, at least at first, many teachers' *existing* skills, requiring them to abandon or reduce these and adopt unfamiliar ones. Such alterations make all of us feel inadequate and insecure, especially if we have been practicing for a long time and have seen our performance as exemplary. Ultimately, if we see the effort through, we may develop new skills (and the change may come to mean progress). But this is rarely true at the outset.

Given these realities, leaders of change need to apply pressure and support. If people are to adopt a change, they must understand its *why*, *what*, and *how*: why they can't keep doing what they've been doing; what they must start doing; and how they can achieve this goal. Unless faculty are sufficiently dissatisfied with the current state of affairs (and their role in maintaining it) and unless they are sufficiently clear about the new vision (and the path to reaching it) they have no reason to endure the losses and challenges required. Pressure can be defined as anything that makes it harder to continue the old. It ranges all the way from simply asking people, “Why do you do it that way?” to threatening to fire them if they keep doing so. Support can be defined as anything that makes it easier to try something new. It ranges from training to financial and other incentives to training, praise, and encouragement. Relying on pressure alone simply drives resistance underground; relying on support alone leaves people free to keep postponing change.

The leader must make the case for change by disconfirming people's reading of their situation and their satisfaction with their present practices. This does not mean castigating and blaming them, but it often means challenging them—respectfully—to face realities they have avoided. Effective implementation thus begins with candid discussion. Leaders have to justify the changes they propose. This requires a clear *why* statement outlining the current challenges and issues and the risks of continuing with the current ways of coping (“We haven't kept pace with the knowledge base about teaching,” “We're losing

families because they think we're not state of the art," and so on). Accompanying this must be similar clarity about the *what* ("We need to stop doing so much X and start doing more Y"), and the *how* ("We're going to offer the following supports and we're going to set a reasonable timeline for the change, and we're going to allocate time to monitor how we're doing en route").

Applying pressure means asserting power, which makes many independent school leaders anxious. But waiting for people to buy-in to new ideas that cause loss almost never works. *Buy-in is an eventual outcome of innovation, not a precondition for it.* At times people must be required to try something new, since only in this way do they discover that they can master it. So managing resistance calls for clarity about what is—and is not—negotiable. In schools where the leadership has routinely ignored or backed away from faculty members who've refused to implement a new initiative, it will be especially important to make it plain that the school is moving in a particular direction and that ultimately there won't be a place for those who don't—or won't—come along.

If pressure is essential, so, too, is support: encouragement, time to adjust, confirmation about what *won't* change, recognition for steps, even small ones, in the new direction, and above all, an effort to highlight continuity wherever possible ("We've always been a school that wanted the best for students, but in this changing world we need to modify that definition, as follows...").

Answering Trustees

The remaining step is to address with board members their questions about how the school assesses student and teacher performance. In my experience this is best begun in a half-day retreat or an extended session dedicated solely to accountability, one which key academic administrators also attend. It would begin by introducing trustees—directly, succinctly, with concrete examples and without jargon—to the three key steps above. It would then review the key student performance data the school tracks, the way it assesses teachers, and how it handles low performers.

It should review the standardized or other major tests that the school administers, how the tests are useful, and how the students score. Context is crucial here. In my experience, non-educators typically assume that every test score primarily reflects the school's input. This is rarely true, especially on standardized tests. (SAT scores, for example, correlate most highly—indeed almost perfectly—with family income.⁸) To the extent that a school relies on teacher-generated assessments to measure the outcomes it values most, leaders need to give the board specific examples ("In 11th grade English we concentrate on expository

writing and students learn to produce an essay with these four major components, which we measure as follows...")

Any other significant data about school performance should be shared with trustees. The results of regional accreditation, for example, especially any findings that bear directly on teaching and learning. Some schools also conduct on-going program reviews, in which each year a different department or division has its program evaluated by a team of outside educators. Other schools survey students and graduates (and sometimes their parents) about their academic experience. Whatever data the school collects, trustees should hear about it—along with the right context for understanding what they hear.

As for supervising and assessing teachers, leaders will need to offer a crisp, clear explanation of the key measures they use to judge performance, emphasizing that although the process does not yield hard numbers, it is based on deliberate, objective, factual observation. ("Our philosophy of instruction emphasizes X and Y, and so when I visit a classroom, I'm focussing on the following areas and I want to see specifics for each.") Not long ago I watched a school head walk her trustees through her classroom observation approach. The things she looks for are common in many supervision/evaluation systems. They include, among others:

1. Whether students are actively engaged.
2. How the teacher frames the purpose and directions for the lesson.
3. How the teacher fosters students' connections between prior knowledge and new learning.
4. Whether the questions stretch students (rather than, say, just calling for a simple yes or no).
5. How the teacher checks for understanding and uses student responses to guide instruction.
6. Whether the teacher has assessed students' skills and knowledge levels of the content prior to embarking on a unit and how he/she will assess outcomes at the end of the unit.
7. How the teacher differentiates his/her approach to meet different students' needs.

It can be very useful to follow this kind of presentation with guided classroom visits for board members. They receive an orientation about things to look for, and then each visits several classes (whose teachers agree to be visited), often accompanied by an administrator or a faculty member. Afterwards there is a chance to debrief, either with the teacher(s) or with the accompanying educator. These events almost always give board

members a new appreciation of the faculty's and the leaders' work.

Even so, trustees will want to know how the school handles under-performing teachers. They will need to hear why these faculty are entitled to support, training, focused supervision, and the like—and why it's problematic to abruptly dismiss teachers in, say, mid-year. But they rightfully expect that persistent low-performers will not be retained. If, as suggested above, the school has started to establish clearer expectations for performance and growth, trustees will benefit from knowing this—and from seeing the evidence of it.

The Greater Good

A fully valid and reliable measure of accountability is sure to remain elusive. Because the classroom is such a socially complex place and so many variables affect what goes on there we will probably never be able to specify exactly how much value a given teacher—or a school as a whole—adds to students. But we already know enough to help every teacher and school improve what they provide. This alone is reason enough to make the effort. As Grant Wiggins notes, a school's trustees, parents, and students are entitled to accountability as a matter of "fairness and better insight into what works and what doesn't pedagogically," and teachers benefit from knowing whether they are actually fulfilling their good intentions.⁹ Accountability conversations are rarely easy, but they are a potentially powerful engine of personal and institutional growth, helping teachers, leaders, and trustees to learn from each other, and helping the entire school to be all it can be.

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¹ Evans, Robert, 2000. "Why A School Doesn't Run—or Change—Like A Business." *Independent School*, Spring. <http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ISMagazine/Pages/Why-a-School-Doesn%27t-Run-or-Change-Like-a-Business.aspx>. See also Silverman, Les and Lynn Taliento, 2006. "What Business Execs Don't Know—but Should—About Nonprofits." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Summer.

http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/what_business_execs_dont_know_but_should_about_nonprofits. Retrieved: 3/8/13.

² The track record of pay-for-performance in schools is abysmal. See Murnane, Richard J. and David K. Cohen, 1986. "Merit Pay and the Evaluation Problem: Understanding Why Most Merit Pay Plans Fail and a Few Survive." *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, 1 (Spring), pp.1-18. See also Ravitch, Diane, November 18, 2012. "Payment by Results in 1862!" Blog post. <http://dianeravitch.net/2012/11/18/payment-by-results-in-1862>. Retrieved: 2/5/13.

³ Wiggins, Grant, May 6, 2012. Blog. <http://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2012/05/06/value-added-why-its-use-makes-me-angry-or-good-idea-gone-bad>. Retrieved: 3/13/13.

⁴ See, for example, Rothstein, Richard, 2006. "The Social and Economic Realities that Challenge All Schools." *Independent School*, November. <http://www.nais.org/Magazines-Newsletters/ISMagazine/Pages/The-Social-and-Economic-Realities-that-Challenge-All-Schools.aspx>. Retrieved: 2/25/13.

⁵ These recommendations are made by Wiggins (op. cit.), who also suggests that in addition to having their teaching observed, teachers be required to choose 3-4 brief video clips of their teaching to illustrate what they see as their strengths and weaknesses.

⁶ Evans, Robert, 2010. *Seven Secrets of The Savvy School Leader: A Guide to Surviving and Thriving*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, especially Chapter Three. See also Evans, Robert, 1996. *The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance, and the Real-life Problems of Innovation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁷ This paragraph and the one preceding it draw on Marris, Peter, 1986. *Loss and Change*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 10-11.

⁸ College Board, 2012. *2012 College Bound Seniors Total Group Profile Report*. <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/research/TotalGroup-2012.pdf>

⁹ Wiggins, op. cit. and also May 22, 2012. <http://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2012/05/22/on-accountability-part-2-how-to-do-it-right>. Retrieved: 2/5/13.