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# The Locus of Control Issue in Standards-Based Accountability

Larry McNeal and  
W. Keith Christy

Many states have developed complex approaches to standards-based accountability because both policymakers and educators recognize that accountability requires credible assessment tasks – tasks that clearly reflect the language of the standards and that articulate good classroom instruction. Additionally, these tasks must integrate local and state data to determine what is effective in promoting successful student outcomes. Some states are using a range of measures to gauge student outcomes because it is difficult to build an assessment system that is sufficiently reliable for making high-stakes decisions about school districts, schools, and students. An effective state-designed standards-based accountability system must then focus resources and policy to insure that assessment at the microlevel is sophisticated, rigorous, and self-correcting. Those goals are best accomplished by placing more authority, not less, in the hands of those who interact the most frequently with students. Locus of control at the microlevel must be the credo of an effective standards-based assessment system. Standards are implemented and institutionalized at this level; therefore they should originate at this level.

## The Move to Standards-Based Accountability

Accountability has come to dominate the discourse about schools and their accomplishments. The discourse has arisen out of America's fascination with holding the public education system accountable for its outcomes. This current wave of accountability has its roots in the "historical turning point" of the Soviet Union launching of the first space ship in 1957 when the belief arose that American students were falling behind their counterparts in other countries (Bybee, 1997). It was at this juncture that policymakers began to "perceive the United States as scientifically, technologically, militarily, and economically weak." (Bybee, 1997, par.2). This brought into question whether or not the American educational system had the capacity to provide direction and motivation to students, parents, teachers, and others to help students learn the skills needed to succeed both in school and in life after school. It was also at this juncture where state and federal policymakers became more actively engaged in the conduct of education, including advocacy for the increased use of standardized tests to assess school learning.

According to Linn (2000), the belief that students in the United States were falling behind other countries led policymakers by the 1970s

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to instigate a minimum competency testing approach to improve public education. States began to rely on tests of basic skills to ensure, in theory, that all students would learn at least the minimum needed to be productive citizens. Florida was one of the states that implemented a statewide minimum competency test that students were required to pass prior to graduation. The early gains in test scores that Florida experienced were used as an example of how standards and accountability systems could improve education. Other states followed Florida's lead and implemented minimum competency testing programs. States also followed Florida's shift away from minimum competency testing when test score gains reached a plateau and differential pass rates and increased dropout rates among ethnic minorities and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were discovered. In the 1980s, the minimum competency test approach was almost entirely discarded because of the concern that it promoted low standards. In many schools, the content of these tests became the maximum in which students became competent, and this was widely perceived as weakening the content learned in schools as demonstrated by the fact that the "average achievement of high school students on most standardized test was lower than when Sputnik had been launched." (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk*. In the report, the Commission called for an end to the minimum competency testing movement and fostered the beginning of a high-stakes testing movement that would raise the nation's standards of achievement drastically. The report triggered a nationwide panic regarding the shortcomings of the American education system. The description of poor student performance on basic skills and knowledge tests, low levels of student achievement, and low rates of adult literacy, in comparison to international counterparts, resonated with the American public. Many were convinced that some schools in the United States were performing poorly and that the United States was in jeopardy of losing its global standing.

The shortcomings identified in the report resulted in many state governments taking a more active role in developing a better understanding of how students perform and schools operate. This led to the establishment of student-learning standards at the state level aligned with accountability systems and more state control over public education (The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment, 2001). The belief was that students would be motivated to learn; school personnel would be forced to do their jobs; and the condition of education would inevitably improve – without much effort and without great cost to the state. What made sense in theory gained widespread attention and eventually increased in popularity as a method for school reform.

## The Standards-Based Accountability Approach

In the ensuing two decades since *A Nation at Risk*, many states have recalibrated their educational accountability systems as they first moved the focus from school district accountability to building-based accountability and then to student accountability in the drive to improve student outcomes. In most states, accountability measures that assess students' progress were attached to school reform legislation in order to hold schools, administrators, teachers, and students accountable for meeting newly imposed standards in core subjects. State policymakers in every state:

[but] Iowa... have academic standards in at least some subjects; 50 test how well their students are learning; and 27 hold schools

accountable for results, either by rating the performance of all schools or identifying low-performing in an attempt to find the most effective way to improve student achievement (Quality Counts 2001, p. 1).

The standard-based assessment approach incorporates several purposes and characteristics. According to Bond and Roebber (1996), the purposes of standards-based accountability are to improve "instruction and curriculum, program evaluation, school performance reporting, student diagnosis or placement, high school graduation, and school accreditation." Claycomb and Kysilko (1997) point out that the standards-based accountability system has the following characteristics in common. The characteristics are:

[A]n alignment with rigorous standards, a design that will address specific goals and purposes, a balance between validity, reliability, and efficiency, a process for informing instruction with consequences, an array of mechanisms to encourage schools and districts to align their instruction and evaluation with standards, and a clear articulation national measures of student performance (p. 5).

The standards-based accountability approach to enhance student performance is an indication that state policymakers are developing a better understanding of how students perform and schools operate to promote student outcomes. This trend has resulted in the establishment of new and interesting standards-based accountability systems with an array of different kinds of measures to ensure that student-learning standards are met.

The "most widely used assessment measures" are norm-referenced tests that compare individual student performance against the performance of a representative national sample of similar students; criterion-referenced tests that compare individual student performance to clearly defined standards; multiple-choice assessments; and performance-based assessments that require individual students to formulate an original response to a question and to communicate that response through the performance of some act (Claycomb & Kysilko, 1997). Many standards-based accountability systems use a variety of the assessment measures identified above to monitor student achievement, with most using both norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests to measure the performance of their students.

### **The Macro and Micro Environment of Standards-Based Accountability**

In linking accountability to assessment, policymakers borrowed principles from the business sector, and now the educational system of the United States is being transformed into a standards-based system that is built on measurable outcomes rather than compliance with rules and regulations. There are, however, difficulties associated with standards-based accountability systems. The difficulties arise out of the environments where standards-based accountability systems are designed, promulgated, implemented, and institutionalized. The environments are the macro-environment of state government and micro-environment of the local schools. Both environments can lay a claim for being the locus of control for school improvement, but only one has the power to exercise that control.

State-derived accountability, which has become the primary means by which school reform is designed and promulgated, is a macro-environmental based model. Embedded in the macro-environment

are the educational norms, expectations, and values of the larger community of stakeholders filtered through a political lens. The locus of control in the macro-environment is at the level where change can be mandated. Determinations about the design and promulgation of standards-based accountability emerge through the political process and flow downward to local schools. Local schools are then expected to implement and institutionalize standards-based accountability initiatives.

Implementation and institutionalization of state designed accountability is the primary means by which the school actualizes reform. The implementation and institutionalization is at the micro-environmental level. Embedded in the micro-environment are the educational norms, expectations, and values of local stakeholders. Collectively, these norms, expectations, and values define the educational programs and services provided by local schools in a community. They also define the issue of locus of control within a political-social-economic framework that is local in nature, and it is from this framework that school improvement originates. As an organization changes, in response to stimuli in its environment, it attempts to realign itself in ways that facilitate the accomplishment of its goals. The impetus for this response is the involvement of local stakeholders who represent the norms, expectations, and values of the local educational community. For standards-based accountability to be effective, it must manifest from within the micro environment first and move upward through state departments of education.

As previously mentioned, there are problems with standards-based accountability systems arising from the environments in which state departments of education and local schools exist. The first problem occurs at the macro-environment level. This is the level where standards-based accountability approaches are designed and promulgated by state policymakers. One might say that policymakers at this level have the tendency to perceive standards-based accountability as a concert performance of Mozart's *Fifth Symphony* where the melody appears to flow as beautifully as water gliding over small stones in a high mountain brook. The dilemma with this viewpoint is that state designed standards-based accountability systems are usually extremely complex. These systems involve a range of interconnected design and technical issues ranging from test validity, incentives, and sanctions to how the outcomes will be used to improve the learning processes of students. The design and promulgation process is further complicated by the need of state policymakers to resolve other pertinent issues such as identifying the performance measurements to be used, subject matters to be tested, grade levels to be tested, types of student to be tested, acceptable level of performance, and consequences for failure or success. The end result is not a universal version of Mozart's *Fifth Symphony* from each state but fifty distinct variations of standards-based accountability that have been filtered through the political process and that are then passed on to schools to implement and institutionalize. A challenge for the state is overcoming the design and technical issues along with the pertinent issues that hinder policymakers' willingness or ability to share the locus of control for improving schools with local school stakeholders.

The second problem is at the micro-environment level. This is the level where standards-based accountability approaches are implemented and institutionalized. The dilemma is that full implementation of state designed standards-based accountability systems is neither embraced nor institutionalized in public schools. Furthermore, the implementation and institutionalization processes are complicated by the failure of both

state and local policymakers to understand the local school's capacity to respond to change, especially change that is external and top-down. The standards-based accountability approach is a change process for holding local schools, administrators, teachers, and students accountable for meeting newly imposed standards. To a lesser degree, it is also an approach for holding state policy makers accountable for improving educational outcomes. To offer another metaphor, at the micro-environment level, standards-based accountability can be perceived as a rock band's version of Tina Turner's *Proud Mary, Keep On Rolling*, where the music starts out slow and goes almost into a gentle whisper before the melody picks up speed and the rhythm becomes overwhelming and almost impossible to dance to (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). A challenge for schools is building the capacity to respond to external and top-down mandated change while at the same time changing the locus of control for improving schools.

### Summary

In considering how change occurs in complex organizations, it is apparent that it occurs simultaneously in the macro-environment and micro-environment but not necessarily as a symphony performing Mozart's *Fifth Symphony* nor a rock band performing Tina Turner's rendition of *Proud Mary, Keep On Rolling*. Rather, change occurs as a musical mosaic that has a melody and rhythm that ebbs and flows depending on what is needed and who has the capacity to make it happen. It is also the duality of change in complex organizations where the locus of control for improving local schools has switched from the micro-environment to the macro-environment that makes successful implementation and institutionalization of standards-based accountability so unpredictable.

Change theory is consistent about the effectiveness of change arising out of the micro-environment versus change arising from the macro-environment (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 5). In considering how change occurs in complex organizations, such as schools, it is important to remember "even moderately complex changes take from three to five years, while major restructuring efforts can take five to ten years." (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 10). Standards-based accountability is, at the minimum, a moderately complex change which requires a major commitment of organizational resources in order to be successful. The success of the standards-based accountability approach will not be determined at the macro environment level but at the micro environment level where it has to be implemented and institutionalized. Success then is a function of the responses of individual stakeholders at the micro environment who have the responsibility of prioritizing and integrating innovations within the organization. The chance for successful implementation and institutionalization increases when an innovation originates in the same environment in which it has to be implemented and institutionalized.

The standards-based accountability approach means that the conceptualization of the school improvement process is subjected to competing visions of what works and why it works. Sarason (1990) describes this as "a conceptual cloud chamber (p. 33)." Therein lies the biggest challenge. This implies that state designed standards-based accountability initiatives are by their very being born into conflict because of the issue of local control. How stakeholders in the macro- and micro-environments resolve this issue will determine whether or not the standards-based accountability approach is the panacea for school improvement or just another failed educational innovation.

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