

Public Statement

Educational Accountability

American Evaluation Association
Approved November 1, 2006

The American Evaluation Association (AEA) supports educational accountability systems that are methodologically sound and produce credible, comprehensive, context-sensitive information. Such systems can strengthen teaching, learning, and educational governance. With this statement, AEA hopes to contribute to the continuing public debate and evolution of educational accountability systems and, in concert with our *Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and our earlier statement on high stakes-testing in education, to affirm and extend AEA's tradition of encouraging high-quality evaluation.

Good evaluation has much in common with good accountability systems, including responsibility for assuring the highest quality data and their most appropriate use. Accountability systems are mechanisms by which (1) responsibilities and those responsible are identified, (2) evidence is collected and evaluated and, (3) based on the evidence, appropriate remedies, assistance, rewards, and sanctions are applied by those in authority. The relevance, accuracy, and completeness of the evidence are central to appropriate decision-making about policies, institutions, programs, and personnel and to the appropriateness of rewards and sanctions.

The research literature¹ identifies several important concerns that may arise with educational accountability systems, including:

- over-reliance on standardized test scores that are not necessarily accurate measures of student learning, especially for very young and for historically underserved students, and that do not capture complex educational processes or achievements;
- definitions of success that require test score increases that are higher or faster than historical evidence suggests is possible; and
- a one-size-fits-all approach that may be insensitive to local contextual variables or to local educational efforts.

The consequences of an accountability system that is not accurately or completely measuring student learning can be significant. An over-emphasis on standardized tests may lead to a decrease in the scope or depth of educational experiences for students, if the tests do not accurately measure the learning of some. In addition, if resource allocations are based on difficult-to-attain standards of success, an entire educational system may suffer. Consider in particular those schools that are struggling to serve students who face the greatest obstacles to learning. These schools may be at risk for having resources unfairly underestimated or disproportionately withheld.

AEA is dedicated to improving evaluation practice and increasing the appropriate use of evaluation data.¹ To encourage the highest quality accountability systems, we advocate approaches that feature rigor and appropriate methodological and procedural safeguards. AEA encourages movement in the following directions for educational accountability systems.

- **Multiple measures:** Empirical evidence from multiple measures, data sources, and data types is essential to valid judgments of progress and to appropriate consequences. For example, at the local level, if teachers' assessments as well as standardized test scores were incorporated into accountability systems, this could provide more detailed information regarding curriculum mastery by students.
- **Measurement of individual student progress over time:** Many traditional assessments examine current achievement levels only. Including longitudinal data on student progress over time would increase the sensitivity of the system to changes in learning made by individual students and could help identify the effects of services provided.
- **Context sensitive reporting:** Reporting systems that promote awareness of the many influences affecting outcomes are part of a complete and accurate assessment of school quality and student achievement. Findings from research and evaluations should be reported and considered part of a comprehensive educational accountability system.
- **Data-based resource allocations:** If resource allocations take into consideration the needs and difficulties that are identified from comprehensive data of many types, the result could be greater equity in funding and increased support for teachers and schools that serve low-income and other high-risk students.
- **Accessible appeals processes:** The opportunity to appeal decisions enhances the fairness and transparency of an educational accountability system that is itself accountable for the appropriateness of its decisions and the accuracy, completeness, and relevance of its evidence.
- **Public participation and access:** Ideally, accountability systems should be developed and implemented with broad participation by many stakeholders. A system that is open to public involvement and scrutiny is likely to result in a more complete understanding of educational institutions, their contexts, the nature and success of their efforts, and the effects and appropriateness of the consequences of accountability systems.

Educational accountability has the potential to improve the quality of our schools and the experiences and achievements of our children. The concerns and strategies outlined above are intended to encourage educational accountability systems that fulfill that potential.

Development of this statement

A task force composed of David Bernstein, Linda Mabry (chair), Howard Mzumara, Katherine Ryan, and Maria Whitsett was authorized by the AEA Board of Directors to prepare a public statement for issuance by the organization on the subject of educational accountability. Plans, progress, and a draft were presented to AEA members at three town hall sessions during the 2003-2005 association conferences. Additional internal review of drafts was provided by ten AEA members. External review was also provided by a state commissioner of education, a prominent measurement author and technical advisor to many states, a former president of the National Council for Measurement in Education and American Educational Research Association, and the president of a regional education board. The resulting statement was submitted to the AEA Public Affairs Committee, revised based on their feedback, edited or reviewed by two former AEA journal editors and two presidents, and resubmitted. Preliminary Board approval was obtained June 24, 2006, after which the statement was released for online review and comment by the full AEA membership, revised again, and approved by the Board November 1, 2006.