

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Authentic Accountability

“Accountability” has become the fundamental tool for instituting changes in public schools. In most states and districts and through the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, accountability means using standardized test results to trigger labels, sanctions, rewards or interventions for districts, schools, educators or students.

This approach has been both insufficient and has had undesirable side effects. FairTest does not therefore reject accountability, but rather proposes a different approach to accountability: authentic accountability. FairTest is collaborating with education, civil rights, parent and community organizations to develop a set of principles that can guide new accountability programs. The portions of the draft principles found on the reverse are intended to spur further discussion; they are not a final product nor have they been endorsed by any other organizations.

The core elements of a better accountability system include:

1. Federal, state and local governments must work together to provide a fair opportunity for all children to learn a rich curriculum in a supportive yet challenging environment. Governments have generally failed to meet this fundamental accountability requirement because they have not ensured adequate, equitable funding and because they have primarily emphasized test scores.
2. Accountability systems must use multiple forms of evidence of student learning. If we want to know how well students are doing, we need to look at a range of real student work. If we want students to learn more or better, we have to provide teachers and students with useful feedback based on high-quality classroom assessments that encompass a variety of ways to demonstrate knowledge and that fit with how children really learn.
3. Accountability systems must focus on helping teachers and schools ensure educational success for all students. They must also ensure that schools are safe, healthy, supportive and challenging environments. This means providing data useful for improvement efforts, as well as ample time and resources to enable teachers to learn more, share knowledge and get better at what they do.
4. Accountability systems must involve those most directly affected and closest to the classroom. Therefore, the primary accountability mechanisms must be local. They must involve educators, parents, students and the local community; and they must use participatory processes such as local school councils, annual reports and meetings to review school progress.
5. The primary responsibility of state governments is to provide tools and support for schools and teachers to improve while ensuring that equity and civil rights are maintained. Intervention should take place only when localities have been given resources and support and still fail to improve, or when there are uncorrected civil rights violations.

Draft Principles for Authentic Accountability - Summary

A. Accountable to What Ends?

1. *Improvement.* Schools and districts must implement procedures for using information to improve the quality of schools and learning. Because the most fundamental characteristic of good schools is good teaching, extensive high-quality, ongoing teacher training is essential.

2. *Equity.* Education systems must contribute to closing the race and class achievement gaps and to helping overcome the consequences of poverty and racism. The gaps must be closed on all the significant academic, personal and social outcomes that society wants for its children.

3. *Democracy.* Accountability systems must include structures that promote the informed involvement of all the key actors in the education system.

4. *Informing the public.* The public deserves substantive and accurate information about the functioning, successes and problems of public education.

B. Accountable for What?

1. *Priorities.* Accountability must be based on a shared vision and goals for education and schools that prioritize what is most important in academics, student well-being, the school environment, and in how well schools prepare students to be active participants in our democracy, lifelong learners, and able to continue their education and make a living.

2. *Resources.* Government must provide education systems with adequate resources to meet priorities, such as teacher training, small classes, books, technology and supplies.

3. *Student learning.* Education systems should ensure all students learn those things society agrees all should learn and for enabling all students to pursue areas of individual interest.

4. *Student well-being.* Students are happier and achieve more in environments that are welcoming and where students feel empowered, challenged, motivated and supported.

5. *Inclusion.* The progress and well being of all students must be accounted for. Accountability data of all sorts should be broken out by major demographic categories.

C. Accountable to Whom

1. *Higher levels of government* must ensure adequate provision and fair use of resources so as to provide equity of opportunities; safeguard civil and human rights; disseminate knowledge; provide focused help where needed; and intervene in localities only when necessary and with methods that have been shown to be successful.

2. *Local schools and districts and their communities* must be the primary authorities in the accountability process. Schools are first of all accountable to their students, parents and the local community. Local accountability involves active participation and shared power.

D. Accountable by what means

1. *Use multiple forms of evidence.* Accountability requires the use of multiple forms of qualitative and quantitative evidence from academic and non-academic areas to determine whether a student, school, district or the state is doing well and to provide a basis for making improvements. No important decision about a student, a teacher, an administrator, a school or a district should be made using one factor, such as standardized test scores.

2. *Use helpful indicators.* Education systems must assess the key factors, from within and outside of schools, that contribute to or hinder the attainment of important outcomes.

3. *Use helpful student assessment.* Skilled use of feedback to students is one of the most powerful means teachers have for improving learning. Most assessment must be classroom-based and used by well-prepared teachers. Standardized tests should not overpower classroom assessments.