WHEN ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES COLLIDE

Central to school reform efforts over the past 15 years is the issue of accountability. States often implement multiple accountability strategies that can interact to create perverse consequences. The collision of two particular accountability strategies was examined by a team of Michigan State University researchers including Associate Professor Rebecca Jacobsen and doctoral students Jeffery W. Snyder and Andrew Saultz (now an assistant professor at Miami University).

TWO ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES

The researchers examined the interaction of two widespread accountability strategies that were spurred by No Child Left Behind. The first accountability strategy is creating public pressure by publicizing school accountability data. The second accountability strategy is raising the bar on school performance standards and goals. This study looks at whether these two accountability strategies clash when implemented in combination, creating negative effects on public opinion of school quality.

ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGIES NEGATIVELY AFFECT PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

To explore the joint impact of the two accountability strategies of public pressure and of raising school performance standards, the researchers analyzed data from elementary schools in New York City. They looked at parent satisfaction data in relation to New York City Progress Reports that give schools a letter grade—A through F—to evaluate their performance. Specifically, the researchers statistically examined how parental perception at the school level is related to changes in the progress report grade, controlling for additional variables related to student achievement. They found that parent satisfaction declines when school performance grades dropped after the implementation of higher standards, despite the fact that achievement in the school actually increased for several grades and in several subjects. This finding shows that the psychological effect of declining grades is a more significant and negative effect than seeing a school maintain its performance.

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU

This study contributes to our understanding of how the public responds to school accountability data. The research suggests that parents were not aware of the artificial nature of the decline in school performance. In other words, parents were not aware that the decline in progress report grades resulted from a change in policy that raised the bar for achievement, not from a decline in actual student achievement. Understanding how accountability policies can erode support is important because of the vital role that public support plays in maintaining effective public institutions. For instance, public satisfaction is related to the public’s willingness to increase funding and remain engaged in democratic participation. The results of this study illustrate a complex dilemma for policy makers. On the one hand, raising the bar may improve academic achievement in schools. On the other hand, lower ratings in the near-term may harm school support. More specifically, the decline in school performance due to more rigorous standards may decrease public confidence in and satisfaction with the public
education system. This chain of events illustrates the importance of raising awareness in the general public about accountability strategies. To enhance understanding and support, leaders at the state, district, and school levels all have a role to play in educating parents about changes in the school accountability system.

READ THE ARTICLE


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