Standards-Based Accountability Policies

Argument in Favor
Overview

• Philosophy, Strategies, & Rationale for Standards-Based Accountability Policies
• Main Arguments in Favor
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• Racial Subgrouping
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Philosophy of Standards-Based Reform

• All students – not just a few – are capable of achievement and entitled to rich, challenging, and engaging work.

• The role of schools is not to sort and track students as high or low achievers, but rather to see to it that as many students as possible make it over the high bar.
Standards-Based Reform Strategies for States

• Set standards for what children should know and be able to do at particular grade-levels.

• Align their curricula and teacher training to the standards.

• Create statewide tests to measure student achievement.

• Based on the results on the tests, mete out rewards, sanctions, and assistance.
Standards-Based Accountability Policies

- As the primary reform strategy, these policies rely on standards to:
  - Improve efficiency
  - Generate challenging curriculum
  - Create greater system coherence
  - Serve as a basis for new ways of measuring and attaching consequences to the performance of students, teachers, and schools
Argument #1

• Standards by themselves are not likely to yield gains in student achievement.

• Standards have the potential to be an engine of change and improvement but only if states redesign other system components - curriculum, assessment, accountability, teacher education and professional development, and resource allocation - around them.
Argument #2

- States that have focused on aligning various components of their education system with standards have shown improvement in student achievement.
Case Studies: North Carolina and Texas

• Why these states?
  - North Carolina and Texas posted the largest average gains in student scores on the tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress from 1990-1997.
Case Studies: North Carolina and Texas

- Achievement gains were found NOT to be due to:
  - Increased per-pupil spending
  - Reduced teacher/pupil ratios
  - Having more teachers with advanced degrees or more years of experience

- Explanations for test score gains are found in the policy environment established by each state.
Case Studies: North Carolina and Texas

- Key Reform Policies:
  - State-wide academic standards by grade
    - Aligned the textbooks and curriculum with the state-wide standards
  - Holding all students to the same standards
    - Texas requires disaggregation by race, ethnicity, and the SES of the students
  - Statewide assessments closely linked to academic standards
    - New state-wide assessment tests developed in both states which reflected the standards at each grade.
Case Studies: North Carolina and Texas

- Key Reform Policies (Continued)
  - Accountability systems with consequences for results
    - Both states provide monetary rewards for schools based on their test performance.
    - Both take into account absolute levels of test scores as well as gain scores.
    - Both keep close scrutiny of the students not taking tests.
Case Studies:
North Carolina and Texas

• Key Reform Policies (Continued)
  - Increasing local control and flexibility for administrators and teachers
    • Both states acknowledged that teachers and administrators could not be held accountable unless they were given authority and flexibility locally to determine how to meet the standards.
  - Computerized feedback systems, data for continuous improvement
Case Studies: North Carolina and Texas

- Key Reform Policies (Continued)
  - Shifting resources to schools with more disadvantaged students
    - The distribution of resources among schools and school districts must be perceived as being fair and equitable for the acceptance, endurance, and effectiveness of these policies.
  - Infrastructure to sustain reform
    - Both states have a variety of groups that together support the process of continual improvement in education.
Case Studies: North Carolina and Texas

- Evidence
  - Texas and North Carolina made largest gains on NAEP scores from 1990-1996
  - Large gains were also registered on both reading and math scores on individual state assessment tests
  - Individual state assessments show larger gains for minority students in Texas, similar gains for black and non-Hispanic white student in North Carolina, but smaller gains for Hispanic students.
Standards-Based Accountability Policies: Racial Subgrouping

- Racial subgroup rules may be worthwhile if they are effective in forcing schools to focus on the academic achievement of minority youth.
- Comparisons of states that do and do not use subgroup rules are inconclusive.
- Subgroup status depends on two dimensions – the percentage of all students in the group and the absolute number.
Standards-Based Accountability Policies: Racial Subgrouping

- Kane and Staiger (2002) are unable to find an impact of the subgroup rules on minority performance, however they acknowledge that this does not necessarily show evidence that test-based incentives are ineffective in general – only that racial subgroup rules are not having their intended impact.
Kane and Staiger (2002)

• “There is some evidence that test-based accountability systems do improve test performance overall, although it is not clear whether such test score gains are achieved with broad learning, teaching to the test, or outright cheating (20).”
Standards-Based Accountability Policies: Recognition and Reward Programs

- Mandated standards in many circumstances work to create accountability by shifting the focus away from inputs to measured student outcomes.

- Many standards-based policies combine the focus on outcomes with the use of financial incentives to recognize and reward the most effective schools.
Standards-Based Accountability Policies: Recognition and Reward Programs

- The goal of these programs is to provide signals and incentives similar to those that might emerge from a market system with the purpose of holding various actors accountable.

- To be effective, recognition and reward systems must change behavior in ways that encourage student learning.
Standards-Based Accountability Policies: Recognition and Reward Programs

- School-based incentive programs are better than incentives for individual teachers.
  - Better chance of changing the school culture and norms.
  - Schools can be more responsive to incentives than can individual teachers.
  - Could lead to more teacher involvement in decisions about the form of teacher training and thereby to better programs.
Standards-Based Accountability Policies: Recognition and Reward Programs

• Teaching to the test
  - Teachers may focus too narrowly on the measures that are used in the ranking system, to the detriment of broader goals of student learning - however, if the test reflects a well-designed curriculum, then teaching to the test may be exactly what the state or district intends.
Recognition and Reward Programs: South Carolina and Dallas

- Both South Carolina and Dallas control for family and community background.
- Both begin by measuring the difference between each student’s absolute performance and his/her predicted performance.
- In both places, a “gain” signifies a change from a benchmark or predicted score rather than from an actual score in the previous year.
- Assessing the effects of these programs on student outcomes in South Carolina and Dallas, in isolation from the rest of their education reform policies, are difficult if not impossible.
Standards-Based Accountability Policies: Recognition and Reward Programs

Supporters view school-based recognition and reward programs as desirable because:
- They provide recognition to deserving but sometimes underappreciated school officials
- They provide incentives for school officials to focus attention on student learning and to increase that learning
- They may facilitate or drive other changes, such as site-based management, that could lead to better schools.
Making Standards Work: A Case Study of WA State

• 2 statewide samples of elementary schools whose students had taken the 4th grade WASL in 1997 and 1998
  - 1 sample of 30 schools whose scores had improved significantly
  - 1 sample of 10 schools that served demographically similar students and were located in the same parts of the state, but whose scores had improved only slightly or not at all.
Making Standards Work: A Case Study of WA State

• **Key Conclusions:**
  - Effective changes in teaching methods and materials are focused and school-wide, not random and fragmented.
    - The vast majority of schools whose scores increased made a single change that affected the whole school and unified the efforts of all teachers.
  - Improving schools focused their efforts on developing children’s skills in a few core subjects or skill areas.
    - Many schools abandoned activities that were fun and familiar but had no well-defined instructional objectives.
Key Conclusions (Continued)

- Improving schools operate as teams, not random associations.
  - Improving schools made sure that teachers at every grade level were coordinating their efforts.
- Professional development is school development.
  - Improving schools took more initiative to find and use professional development programs designed to remedy their particular instructional weaknesses.
Making Standards Work: A Case Study of WA State

- Key Conclusions (Continued)
  - Performance pressure is positive when it leads to determination, not fear.
  - Improving schools don’t wait for help, they seek it out.
  - Improving schools use limited resources strategically.
  - Parents can help.
    - Improving schools were more likely to reach out to parents, asking for help at home.
Making Standards Work: A Case Study of WA State

• “Studies like this one show that school improvement depends more than anything else on human effort (14).”
Conclusion

• Standards-based accountability policies can increase the academic achievement for all students.

• In order to be successful however, these efforts must be:
  - Aligned with other educational reform efforts
  - Supported over time by many of the key stakeholders