



## NEWS FROM EPI

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## BOOK MAPS NEW ROUTE FOR IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

***Grading Education* shows how to repair the failures of No Child Left Behind and lays groundwork for new approaches**

State and federal policies (like No Child Left Behind) - that attempt to close the achievement gap by holding schools accountable for improved math and reading test scores - have failed. That's why a new accountability system has been proposed by Economic Policy Institute education policy expert Richard Rothstein and two coauthors in a new book published jointly by EPI and Teachers College Press.

"*No Child Left Behind* has backfired on the very children and schools we set out to help," said Rothstein. "Its most important shortcoming is that it forces schools to focus almost exclusively on just one goal - basic skills in math and reading - while abandoning other equally important goals that are essential for a good education. A high-quality education system must include a workable accountability component. But NCLB is so fundamentally flawed that it is unfixable. It is time to admit our mistakes and go back to the drawing boards to create an accountability system that will support, not undermine student achievement."

**Where NCLB Fell Short:** In *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right*, authors Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen and Tamara Wilder propose a new accountability policy for schools and other institutions of youth development. This new policy has the potential to support rather than undermine the ambition of raising student achievement and substantially narrowing the achievement gap. NCLB (and similar narrow test-based accountability policies in the states) have not only failed to improve education overall, but sabotaged those efforts in many ways, including:

- NCLB ignores and even undermines many of the consensus goals long-held by Americans as essential components of public education. Because narrow test-based accountability systems create incentives to redirect all school efforts toward raising math and reading test scores in schools serving the neediest students, those students are increasingly denied the opportunity to develop their competence in non-tested subjects such as science, history, and the arts, as well as in citizenship, social skills and the other behavioral traits that public education was designed to develop.
- The incentives of narrow test-based accountability systems corrupt the teaching of math and reading as well, substituting drill and test preparation for instruction that develops students' abilities to reason and think critically. The test-score gains claimed by advocates of current policies often turn out to be fraudulent, and do not represent real gains in skill or understanding.
- Policies designed to increase the share of students who achieve "proficiency" in math and reading have created incentives to write-off the most severely disadvantaged students so that schools can focus their instructional efforts on less

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disadvantaged students whose test scores are just barely below the required proficiency score cut-offs.

**Resetting Goals:** *Grading Education* sets out, first, to identify the appropriate goals of education that have been defined by policymakers and educators throughout the nation's history. The authors also report on their own polling of today's adult population and elected officials that confirm a broad consensus on eight fundamental goals of public education:

1. Basic academic knowledge and skills in reading, writing, math, science and history;
2. Critical thinking and problem solving;
3. Appreciation of the arts and literature;
4. Preparation for skilled employment;
5. Social skills and work ethic;
6. Citizenship and community responsibility;
7. Physical health;
8. Emotional health.

**Building a Better Yardstick:** *Grading Education* asserts that children's and schools' educational achievement cannot be measured exclusively by standardized testing in basic skills. Definitions of "proficiency" on such tests have no scientific credibility and create incentives for schools and teachers to "game" the testing system. Test score results are unreliable bases for evaluating school quality even in math and reading because it takes multiple re-tests to get an accurate assessment of achievement.

Getting a true picture of progress requires a mix of objective and subjective evaluative tools, including on-site observations by trained experts. *Grading Education* describes how the federal government can monitor state performance in each of the eight goal areas, providing data not only on academic proficiency but on citizenship behavior, cooperative problem-solving, health status and behaviors, and even adherence to key American values. The book then places responsibility for designing accountability policies for individual schools, and remedies for shortcomings in each of the eight areas, back on the states where such responsibility belongs. The authors describe how states can supplement data from better tests with information gathered by trained school inspectors who can report on whether schools are following policies known to support student success.

*Grading Education* notes that some states do not have the fiscal capacity to provide an adequate education, so holding their schools accountable for doing so is bound to fail. It calls for the federal government to devote its efforts to remedying interstate fiscal inequality, rather than trying to micromanage school practices, as NCLB attempts to do.

One cause of the failure of NCLB and similar state-based accountability policies has been the desire to do accountability on the cheap. A high-quality school accountability system would be considerably more expensive, but still cost less than 1 percent of our total school spending. This is a small price to pay for ensuring that schools and other institutions of youth development are successful in generating high student performance in each of the goal areas the American public demands that our public schools fulfill.

**We Should Have Known:** *Grading Education* shows that policymakers should have known that NCLB and similar narrow test-based accountability systems could not work. The book reviews widely accepted conclusions from other fields, such as health care, job training, criminal justice, and corporate incentive systems, demonstrating that reliance on quantitative measures alone to measure institutional quality (or that of employees) leads inevitably to institutional corruption. That's why even the private sector employs accountability and incentive systems that mostly rely upon qualitative evaluation, with numerical indicators playing only a minor role.

**We Once Did Know:** The only federal test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), was designed in the 1960s to avoid the dangers of NCLB-type policies. NAEP initially assessed behavioral as well as cognitive knowledge and skills, but its broad scope was abandoned under budget pressure of the 1980s, and never restored. *Grading Education* reviews the story of early NAEP and shows how its principles could help form the basis of a new accountability system.

**Other Models:** A new accountability policy could also build on a nationwide system of school accreditation, already in existence. The book describes the evolution of accreditation and shows how it should be reformed to meet the goals we seek from accountability systems. Other nations have also developed accountability policies that avoid the corruption of narrow test-based systems. In particular, the English inspection system for schools and other institutions of youth development includes design elements that a new American accountability system could use.

**Where Does the Buck Stop?** The authors argue that if we are to reach the broader and more appropriate goals of youth development we must recognize, first, that schools play a crucial role in our success or failure at reaching them, and, second, that schools *alone* cannot achieve all of them without the full participation of other institutions such as early childhood programs, health care, and after-school and summer programs.