



Alienated Parents - An Unexpected Downside of School Accountability Reforms

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Over the past three decades, policymakers in every state have sought to improve schools by setting standards and establishing more centralized control over education policy. Although details vary, every state has adopted new academic standards and instituted regular tests to measure student progress. Individual schools are supposed to be held accountable for progress. This set of reforms generates fierce controversies – pitting advocates against people who fear that schools are being transformed into testing factories.

As this debate rages, too little attention has been paid to the full impact of newly instituted accountability reforms on public school communities. In recent work, I focus on how newly imposed standards, testing, and accountability policies influence the participation of one vitally important group: public school parents. Perhaps surprisingly, my research demonstrates that parents residing in states with more developed assessment systems express more negative attitudes about government and education and participate less actively in their children's education. Educational researchers have firmly established that parental involvement is closely correlated with student achievement, so redesigning and improving accountability reforms to enhance parental involvement must be a priority for reformers.

Exploring the Broader Consequences of Accountability Reforms

At first blush, the idea that accountability reforms could erode parents' support for government and stifle their civic participation in politics seems bizarre. But on second thought there are reasons to suspect that any set of school reforms could have consequences well beyond the classroom. Political scientists have demonstrated convincingly that public policies affect citizens' perceptions of government and their willingness to participate in the democratic process. When policies provide generous benefits and empower citizens to participate actively in decision-making, they tend to promote more positive political attitudes and encourage political engagement. In contrast, policies that feature punishments or that treat beneficiaries in a paternalistic fashion discourage active citizenship.

Because most parents are deeply invested in their children's education, it stands to reason that their political attitudes and behavior could be influenced by measures affecting their children's schools. Unfortunately, state-administered accountability regimes are rarely designed to encourage active citizenship among parents. Rather than emerging from "bottom-up" citizen efforts, these reforms usually embody a "top-down" model of educational policymaking in which state lawmakers and administrators drive changes in schools. Whatever their other merits, school accountability policies convey a punitive message, declaring that schools have to shape up, or else face the prospect of sanctions. A reasonable hypothesis, tested in my research, is that accountability reforms with such top-down and punitive features could alienate parents.

Worrisome Research Results

To investigate whether and how school accountability policies affect parents' attitudes and behaviors, I conducted a nationally representative survey of more than 400 public school parents. I recorded basic individual characteristics like age, education, race, and income, and asked parents questions intended to tease out their attitudes toward schools and government more generally. I also asked about involvement in their children's education. Crucially, I also collected data about the states where parents lived, including information on the rigor of academic standards and testing and accountability practices. In evaluating the strength of school reforms, I focused on two key characteristics: the extent to which each policy covered a broad range of subjects and grade levels and interlocked with other education reforms.

Using a variety of statistical models, I investigated how the strength of accountability reforms affected parents' attitudes and behaviors when other important individual and state-level characteristics are taken into account. The results provide strong evidence that parents have more negative political attitudes and participate less

actively in their children's schooling when they reside in states that have adopted more rigorous and comprehensive school reforms – particularly very tough assessment policies. Critics have focused on testing's impact on schools, but my research highlights perhaps more worrisome spillover effects that discourage parental involvement with their children's education.

What Should be Done?

Since parental involvement is closely linked with student achievement, the most hard-nosed of existing accountability programs not only undermine civic participation – a worrisome result for American democracy – they also seem to frustrate the central purpose of reforms to boost student achievement. However, the problem lies not with the basic idea of school accountability, but with the design and execution of accountability regimes. As currently constituted, most state accountability regimes provide few opportunities for direct parental involvement in decision-making, and rely too heavily on punitive, test-driven accountability. Discouraging parental input is surely not the intention, but signals are being sent that have that effect. Too many parents are responding to accountability programs by withdrawing from their children's education.

To reinvigorate parental involvement in education, accountability reformers need to:

- **Redesign reforms to empower parents.** For example, find ways to consult parents directly in determining academic standards and routines for sharing and using test information to make school improvements. Give them an active stake in reform.
- **Provide more support for students and families in struggling schools.** The prospect of sanctions may encourage faltering schools to work harder, but threatened school closings or cutbacks can alienate parents, especially those who care the most. To sustain parental faith, policymakers need to provide extra financial, curricular, and pedagogical supports as schools are overhauled. Supports cannot replace sanctioned changes, but they can send a signal that policymakers care deeply about keeping parents involved as school leadership changes and modes of instruction are upgraded.

Read more in Jesse Hessler Rhodes, "**Progressive Policy Making in a Conservative Age? Civil Rights and the Politics of Federal Education Standards, Testing, and Accountability.**" *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 3 (2011): 519-544.