

by Darryl Hunter and Gillian McCreary

You are free to reproduce, distribute and transmit this article, provided you attribute the author(s), Education Canada Vol. 39 (3), and a link to the Canadian Education Association ([www.cea-ace.ca](http://www.cea-ace.ca)) 2010. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Publication ISSN 0013-1253.

# Shared Accountability: The Importance of Cooperation and Comprehensiveness in Accountability Frameworks

Today in Canada, the general public, parents, students and educators have high expectations of public education. Schools are seen as key players in preparing young people for life and work, and publicly funded education is increasingly recognized both as a public good and social capital. In response, provincial governments and school boards are developing accountability regimes to provide reliable information about the performance of their education systems in order to maintain public confidence in and support for public education, and to provide policy makers with the necessary information to support decision making and guide program improvements.

Any accountability regime entails collecting information and reporting on both strengths and weaknesses. This evaluative information can help the general public and decision-makers understand the challenges facing school and provide insight into the complexities of the educational endeavour. It can also distort their views or limit their perspective. Thus, the manner in which educators and administrators conceive and implement accountability regimes is critical. If not carefully thought-out, large-scale assessment, particularly the state-mandated variety, can be a blunt instrument about which educators are understandably nervous.

## A Range of Approaches

Across Canada, a range of approaches to assessment is emerging, reflecting different theories of organizational change and contrasting views of the purpose of education. One approach drives change through extrinsic rewards and sanctions. It assumes the fundamental problems are a lack of will to change on the part of educators and excessive local autonomy. This approach has led to public comparisons between schools according to test results, the linking of test achievement to



funding, and centrally controlled change.

A second approach builds knowledge among school practitioners and parents about effective practices and approaches. Here, the central problems are seen as a lack of knowledge about the possibilities, combined with a lack of organizational capacity for change, insufficient local authority for decision-making, and limited incentives for risk-taking. Educational improvement is stimulated

through multiple opportunities for educators and non-educators to collaborate on the redesign of teaching and schooling.

Similarly, different views of educational purpose affect the use of assessment. When education is seen as a vehicle for sorting students for future educational opportunities and roles in life, assessment is a screening tool. By focusing on test achievement, students and schools are abstracted from the community. On the other hand, when education is seen as a means for cultivating the diverse development of learners, assessment serves to identify strengths and needs so teachers can adapt curriculum and instruction more effectively. In this approach, substantial teacher engagement in assessment strategies, uses, and standards is a prerequisite.

In Saskatchewan, we have based our approach on the latter perspective, recognizing assessment as a support to improved practice that strengthens, rather than simply measures, learning.

## Accountability Based on Cooperation, Comprehensiveness and Teacher Professionalism

Saskatchewan's accountability framework is based on a set of shared principles about appropriate evaluation, jointly developed by education stakeholders. Three of these, cooperation, comprehensiveness, and teacher professionalism, have served the province's education system particularly well.

## ***Cooperation/Shared Responsibility***

Saskatchewan's partners in education work to foster cooperative and collaborative relationships, rather than polarizing interests in education. Saskatchewan Education and its key partners — the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, the League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents, as well as the Saskatchewan Association of School Councils, the universities and Aboriginal teacher training institutions, and business and labour — have worked together for over two decades on initiatives to strengthen the province's education system. This work has included developing consensus on the principles and elements of its accountability framework.

Achieving consensus about assessment issues has not been without difficulty as each partner approaches accountability with different values and interests. Successfully working through these differences is possible due to a number of important practices including consensus seeking, dialogue, relationship and trust building, and transparency.

**Consensus Seeking.** Saskatchewan Education is committed to moving ahead in new or controversial accountability directions only with the consensus of all stakeholders. This recognizes that providing high quality education is a shared responsibility, and facilitates better communication at all levels of the education system because stakeholders agree on goals and appropriate measures for assessing progress. Once joint

decisions are reached, the partners work together to promote them in their own constituencies and with the public. For example, both the Teachers' Federation and the business community have publicly lauded the Saskatchewan Education Indicators Program and suggested areas where further data is required. Consensual decision making strengthens public confidence, as educational leaders agree on strengths and weaknesses and work actively together to implement shared decisions .

## **Dialogue, Relationship, and Trust Building.**

Several permanent committees are in place for close collaboration in formulating provincial education policy, providing continuous structured dialogue outside the media eye. In addition, stakeholders use a variety of less formal venues to ensure that organizations do not become "accidental adversaries". Significant attention is given to the development and maintenance of organizational and individual relationships. A constructive approach to problem solving focuses on pursuing the common ground. Further, education partners are committed not to let disagreement on specific items overshadow their agreement on the overall framework for examining educational quality.

**Transparency.** Throughout all cooperative partnership activities, open information sharing figures prominently in maintaining a climate of trust and mutual understanding. It is understood that accountability, at its foundation, necessitates openness and a willingness to expose oneself to criticism.

---

enbridge

1/2 page

color

strip in

This can be discomforting for teachers, administrators, public servants, curriculum developers, and politicians alike; however, there is a commitment to report both strengths and weaknesses in a balanced fashion.

Further, education partners share plans, outline positions, and consider evaluative information through established processes such as interagency retreats, advisory committee meetings, standard-setting sessions, and interpretation panels. Large-scale assessments are planned, reviewed and critiqued for fairness and equity before administration. Evaluative reports are confidentially shared in draft form with education partners and affected audiences before printing. What would be labeled highly sensitive information in other jurisdictions is exchanged among key stakeholders well before public release for joint follow-up planning.

### **Comprehensiveness**

Given the importance of evaluative information in making policy decisions, setting directions, creating programs, adjusting instruction, and ultimately building public confidence, the collection and reporting of comprehensive information is key. Multiple measures make for better policy and decision-making as a wider array of explanatory information is available to provide insight into *why* schools perform the way they do. Limiting the array of measures for ascertaining quality or denying the range of forces impacting on education can oversimplify and distort decision-making.

For example, the dramatic economic, social and demographic changes currently being experienced across Canada, while external to schools, are deeply influencing the development and well-being of students and educational outcomes. According to Statistics Canada, nearly 21% of the population under 18 lives in poverty; in Saskatchewan, one in 22 teens gave birth in 1995; and the number of Saskatchewan students living on First Nations reserves increased by 40% between 1987 and 1998. An effective accountability framework must recognize and reflect the range of forces affecting schools and provide sound and complete information to develop holistic, multifaceted responses to meet the learning needs of today's students.

The Saskatchewan Education Indicators Program provides four dimensions of information: *contextual* information about the experiences of students such as poverty and culture, and the quality of inputs such as curricula and the allocation of resources; *process* information about the operation of school programs and interactions of parents and professionals; *output* information such as test scores and graduation rates; and, *outcomes* information such as the impact of education on the workplace and society.

This systems approach includes a broad constellation of indicators to create a more balanced and informative picture on which to judge the educational system's performance. It recognizes that a single indicator, such as test scores, provides only partial illumination. Test scores tend to describe only aspects of cognitive achievement, whereas educational goals are much broader. Focusing on test outputs, without consider-

ing context and processes, can lead to a narrowing of instruction and to faulty conclusions about the effectiveness of policy, curricula and practice.

### **Teacher Professionalism**

Teachers as knowledgeable, skilled and reflective professionals are the central figures in ensuring a high quality education. Thus, evaluation activities respect and reflect their role in schooling while simultaneously contributing to continuous professional development.

In Saskatchewan, teachers are engaged in all evaluative activities ranging from test development, to focus group research, to curriculum improvement, to setting standards. This is fundamental both for drawing valid evaluative conclusions and for cultivating ownership of findings. When educators are at the center as key participants in the accountability matrix, evaluation is an integral component of educational change and becomes pivotal in a cycle of continuous improvement.

### **Conclusions**

Saskatchewan has certainly not solved all the riddles of the accountability sphinx. While we aim for an educational accountability regime married with systemic program improvement, we are still facing the challenges of forging a strong and consistent link between evaluation and concerted change. Many educators in Saskatchewan do not yet feel confident in their assessment skills and are only beginning to use evaluative information for program improvement.

Saskatchewan has, however, largely avoided the public spectacles associated with those accountability frameworks that use exclusive, top down assessment practices, test scores and school rankings. This is attributable to cooperative partnerships and consensual decision making, broad-based and balanced information collection and reporting, and teacher engagement as part of their professional development and practice. (We recognize, of course, that it is easier to reconcile different value positions and forge trust relationships in a province with a population smaller than the city of Ottawa-Hull and only slightly larger than Edmonton.)

Yet, we believe we are on the right track. The Provincial Auditor recently commended Saskatchewan Education and our education partners for their leadership in performance reporting, citing the Indicators Program and its collaborative processes as a model of best accountability practice.<sup>1</sup> Teachers, trustees, business people, and parents talk constructively about educational needs and have recently embarked on a joint review of the role of schools in the province. Measures of public confidence in Saskatchewan schools have consistently remained among the highest in the country over the past decade. These are preliminary indications that a collaborative, comprehensive, and principle-based approach to accountability is worthy of consideration. 

<sup>1</sup> Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan. 1998 Fall Report Volume 2 (Regina, SK).

**Darryl Hunter** is Director of Assessment and Evaluation with Saskatchewan Education; **Gillian McCreary** is Executive Director, Planning, Evaluation and Children's Services for Saskatchewan Education and a member of the CEA Board of Directors. [mccreary@sasked.gov.ca](mailto:mccreary@sasked.gov.ca) [dhunter@sasked.gov.ca](mailto:dhunter@sasked.gov.ca)