Executive Summary

FIXING OUR NATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

"Accountability: The obligation to bear the consequences for failure to perform."
-Webster's Dictionary

By Marc S. Tucker

IN PRAISE OF *FIXING OUR NATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM*

As usual, Marc Tucker has provided all of us an effective, fact-based way forward, this time in the area of accountability. Until we start to amend our shortsighted, top-down approach in America and start to involve the field of educators, we will not succeed. Marc cites lessons from the top performing countries of the world. State Leaders should not just listen to Marc, they need to take action!
David Driscoll, Former Massachusetts Commissioner of Education

As always, Marc Tucker's analysis of the problem – in this case educational accountability and testing in America – and his proposed solutions are insightful, provocative, and worth serious consideration. He doesn't shy away from the need for accountability or the use of test score data in such a system. Rather, he asks who should be accountable for what and in what ways, drawing upon examples from across the globe. And he proposes building an integrated system where assessment is balanced in its use such that it supports teaching and learning in contrast to the current practice of using test score data to denigrate the very individuals entrusted with the role of educating our youth.
James W. Pellegrino, Co-Director, Learning Sciences Research Institute, University of Illinois at Chicago

Mr. Tucker makes a bold statement that it is now time to look at this country's educational accountability system, and consider a re-design from the ground up. Much has been positively accomplished under the current No Child Left Behind model, however, as educators and leaders seek to innovate, creating systems that will ensure that students are at the center of the learning environment and that each student leaves K-12 education competent and confident, ready to succeed in either college or career, a one-size fits all model will no longer work. We truly need to engage students, educators, parents, and other key stakeholders in this re-design. This report makes a strong and elegantly written case for change.
Virginia M. Barry, Commissioner of Education, State of New Hampshire

NCEE's report offers a cogent critique of the negative consequences on teaching and learning that have been produced by our nation's current regime of standards and assessments. The report's recommendations offer a feasible and constructive path toward building an accountability system that will guide teaching and learning and foster meaningful support for school improvement and accountability.
Warren Simmons, Executive Director, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, Brown University

Marc Tucker and NCEE take a massive and authoritative step in the right direction for teacher quality, higher standards and more equitable outcomes by setting out the overwhelming evidence for a new and better system of educational accountability. Instead of blue-collar and bureaucratic accountability, Tucker shows, we need responsible professional accountability that will build excellence among the many rather than skewing a whole system in the wrong direction by punishing and haranguing a wayward few. Tucker's reasoning is not sentimental or ideological but just relentlessly consistent with the evidence of high performance everywhere.

Andy Hargreaves, Brennan Chair in Education, Boston College and co-author of *Professional Capital: transforming teaching in every school*

It will not be possible for the United States to compete succesfully in global commerce if it continues to recruit its teachers from the lower ranks of its high school graduates, trains them poorly and pays them far less than its high status professionals. To hold our teachers accountable for the poor performance of America's students under such conditions is unfair and foolish. This report lays out a plan for rebuilding the American education system that rests on the same kinds of policies being pursued by the countries that are eating America's lunch. We should be implementing these policies with all deliberate speed.

William Brock, Former U.S. Senator and Former U.S. Secretary of Labor

Marc Tucker is one of our nation's most creative thinkers about education. In this provocative report, he draws on global strategies to paint a picture of one new approach to accountability in education. His ideas for building and supporting a strong profession of teaching and using fewer and more thoughtful assessments to inform school improvement hold the seeds of a more productive path forward.

Linda Darling-Hammond, Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education and Founding Director, Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No Child Left Behind radically shifted the balance of power in American education policy-making from the states to the federal government, not because a new consensus had emerged to make such a shift, but because both Democrats and Republicans were angry with the nation's teachers, holding them responsible for a massive increase in the costs of our schools, while failing to deliver much in the way of improved student performance in return. The President and the Congress were united in their determination to hold the teachers accountable for that failure and to get value for their money.

But I argue here that, though teachers should be among those held accountable for the failure of the American schools to perform, many others are no less responsible for that failure and should be no less accountable. It is particularly ironic that we are holding our teachers accountable, considering that it was not the teachers, but rather the public, school boards and the Congress that maintained for years a schools policy based on the use of cheap teachers, a policy that placed little value on teachers' skills or mastery of subject matter, and deprived teachers of any hope of a real professional career in teaching and of any chance of gaining the kind of status enjoyed by high status professionals in the United States.

We got what we deserved. Other countries have pursued very different policies, with much better results. Although many of them, like the United States to this day, long had policies that treated teachers like blue-collar workers and held them accountable in the ways that blue-collar workers are held accountable for their work, the top performing countries have abandoned those policies for policies designed to compensate, recruit, educate, train and manage their teachers in ways that are very similar to the ways in which they compensate, recruit, educate, train and manage their doctors, accountants, attorneys, architects and other high status professionals. And they are much more likely than we are to hold their teachers accountable in ways similar to the ways in which they hold their high status professionals accountable.

The thesis here is that one cannot divorce the design of the accountability system for education from the gestalt of the entire education system, and, in particular, the way in which the system treats its teachers overall. No nation is likely to get the kind of results now demanded in the leading industrial

nations unless it is successful at attracting to teaching young people who have the option of entering the high status professions and it will not succeed in doing that unless it provides professional conditions of work to its teachers. One of the most important among those conditions is the design of the accountability system.

The test-based accountability system now universally mandated in the United States—a system that reflects in every way the blue-collar conception of teaching as an occupation—has had ten years to prove itself. The result is very low teacher morale, plummeting applications to schools of education, the need to recruit too many of our teachers from the lowest levels of high school graduates, a testing regime that has narrowed the curriculum for millions of students to a handful of subjects and a very low level of aspiration. There is no evidence that it is contributing anything to improved student performance, much less the improved performance of the very low-income and minority students for which it was in the first instance created.

The system proposed in this paper would replace the current system of test-based accountability with a system that would continue to provide data on overall school performance, on the performance of vulnerable groups of students within the school, and on all students at key points in a student's career. But it would do so in a way designed to improve the curriculum, better serve students from all backgrounds, and make it far more likely that the schools will be able to attract high quality teachers and allocate those teachers fairly among students of all backgrounds.

Most important, it would replace a blue-collar system of accountability with a professional system of accountability, in the process creating very strong incentives for all teachers to work hard and constantly to improve their professional competence or get out of teaching. The mechanism for that would be a system in which teachers' main line of accountability would be not to their supervisor but to other highly motivated teachers.

The essence of the design is very simple. Instead of testing all of our students every year with low-level, cheap tests, our students would take high stakes tests only three times in their whole school career. These tests would be much higher quality tests, testing much more of the kinds of skills and knowledge now demanded for careers that are satisfying and pay well. And these high quality tests would cover the whole core curriculum, so subjects like history, literature, science, social studies, music and the arts would not be slighted. There would be tests in mathematics and English language arts every other year in the off years, but they would be administered only to samples of students and only by computer, and would not carry high stakes either for the teachers or the students.

Both the universal census tests (tests that all students take) and the sampling tests would be used by state officials to identify schools that might be in trouble. Schools so identified would be visited by teams of expert teachers and school administrators who would be asked to identify problems in the school that needed to be addressed and provide a timeline for addressing them. The state would be responsible for providing the help that is needed to address the issues identified by the visiting team. In those cases in which the visiting team thought it was warranted, the state would either require the school district to provide additional teachers, arrange for the school to partner with a stronger school or its teachers to partner with stronger teachers or arrange for a strong school to partner with the weaker school until the performance of the weaker school reached parity with the stronger schools. If the district did not have the resources to make these strategies work, the state itself would take responsibility for making such arrangements. In many cases, the shift of additional teachers to the weak schools would be permanent, not temporary.

The proposal describes policies that would make it attractive for strong teachers and principals to work in schools that really need their help and for strong schools to partner with weak ones. Those policies are part of a larger set of policies designed to transform teaching into a high status profession, policies that will make it possible and attractive for teachers to spend much more of the school day than at present working in teams to improve their own professional competence and to improve the performance of the school. In such schools, teachers work closely with one another throughout the week and would be in and out of each others' classrooms—observing, critiquing and suggesting improvements. They would be mentoring each other. Those at the highest levels of their career ladders would still be in the classroom, teaching, but they would also be building a new culture in the school, one devoted to the constant improvement of practice, a culture in which each teacher would be accountable to the others for the quality of their work. They would, in other words, be practicing the kind of accountability that professionals the world over practice.

Under this plan, a lot of data about each school would be published by the state on a public web site, the community would know when its school was chosen for a visit by an inspection team and would be privy to the inspection report and recommendations and would know when the state concluded that the school had been unresponsive to those recommendations. But no school would be rated A through F on such a web site or anywhere else, no teacher would be announced to have failed by virtue of the scores of his or her students on standardized

tests and no school would be judged to have failed to have made adequate yearly progress on the basis of student test scores alone.

The reader might well ask why one could expect an accountability plan so apparently toothless in comparison to what has already been tried to be more successful than the aggressive plan it would replace. There are two answers to this question. First, the plan that has been tried has not succeeded. Second, several variations on the plan that is now proposed have succeeded, on a national, provincial or state scale, in most of the world's top performing jurisdictions. Perhaps it is time to give up on a plan that, according to theory, should have succeeded, but did not, in favor of a plan that has been shown to work, not once, in one place, but many times, in many places.

The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) is a not-for-profit created to develop proposals for building the world-class education and training systems that the United States must have if it is to continue to be a world-class economy. The National Center engages in policy analysis and development and works collaboratively with others at the local, state and national levels to advance its proposals. Visit www.ncee.org for more information.

The Center on International Education Benchmarking, a program of NCEE, conducts research on the world's most successful education systems to identify the strategies those countries have used to produce their superior performance. Through its web portal, monthly newsletter, and a weekly update of education news around the world, CIEB provides up-to-date information and analysis on those countries whose students regularly top the PISA league tables. Visit www.ncee.org/cieb to learn more.

NCEE's pilot school program, ***Excellence for All***, brings aligned instructional systems used by the best-performing countries to U.S. high schools. These systems have a track record of producing world-class syllabi, instructional materials, examinations and teacher training. *Excellence for All* is aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), enabling participating high schools to not just lay the foundation for the CCSS but to get a head start on implementation. Currently, schools across Arizona, Connecticut, Kentucky and Mississippi are participating. Visit www.ncee.org/e4a for more information.

In 1999, NCEE was asked to create a design for a new kind of national organization to train school principals to lead high performing schools. Three years later, NCEE announced the launch of the **National Institute for School Leadership**. Since its inception, NISL has served over 8,000 principals in more than twenty states; seven state departments of education have chosen NISL to support their school leaders. NISL's Executive Development Program gives districts and states the capacity to strengthen the leadership of both serving principals and aspiring leaders, and is proven to raise student achievement. Visit www.nisl.net to learn more.

Marc Tucker will strike a chord with those who want the next version of accountability for public education to lead to real fixes rather than Band-Aids for the current system. *Fixing Our National Accountability System* delivers far more than a suggestion based in theory; it defines a fact-based, attainable solution that recognizes students' responsibility in their own education, respects educators as true professionals, requires honest assessments of struggling schools' needs, and offers a common-sense role for testing. True to form, Tucker also delivers tough medicine for us all to swallow and I applaud his candor in highlighting a plan with promise.

Dennis Van Roekel
Outgoing President, National Education Association

There are few, if any, aspects of the American education system during the past decade that have been more debated than accountability. Test-based accountability that relies on frequently employed standardized assessments has in many ways taken away much of the professional responsibility and pride that most teachers claim are the moral drivers of the teaching profession. *Fixing Our National Accountability System* takes a critical look at the current accountability policies in the United States and offers a welcomed plan that is based on practices and models in the most successful education systems globally. One of the advantages of this plan is a shift from bureaucratic consequential accountability to more professional peer-to-peer responsibility in all American schools.

Pasi Sahlberg
Visiting Professor of Practice, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Author, *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland*

This paper makes a powerful case that the United States needs to rethink its education accountability system. Tucker traces the way the thinking about accountability in business has changed over the last century and suggests that the schools might take a look at that evolution. You may agree or disagree with Tucker's recommendations, but, either way, this is a paper you ought to read.

Governor John Engler
President, Business Roundtable

Marc Tucker has once again authored a thought provoking piece. The premise is that we must look at the entire education system and not put blame on individuals for the failures of the U.S. education system. Marc is clear that nations outperforming the U.S. provide examples that we need to study. This piece is a must read for policymakers as they chart the course for next generation accountability systems.

Terry Holliday
Commissioner of Education, Commonwealth of Kentucky

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