

INTRODUCTION

From Compulsion to Mutual Assent: Pitching a New Tent for Educational Accountability

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WHAT DOES THE CURRENT SYSTEM ASSUME ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY?

That compulsion works: top-down, test-based mandates backed by surveillance and consequences will drive improvement. The paper argues that approach has hit its limits, and that lasting change has to rest on the assent of the people doing and affected by the work.

THE KEY POINTS IN BRIEF

- **Thirty years of compulsion, limited results.** Top-down, test-based mandates produced high compliance and some bright spots, but not widespread improvement. The costs show up as student disengagement, families leaving, and declining trust in public education.
- **The problem is the paradigm, not the implementation.** Management models shape adult learning, and adult learning shapes classrooms (the Symmetry Argument). Systems run on surveillance and fear also hit diminishing returns, as Campbell's Law and the Golem Effect predict.
- **A new tent is built on mutual assent.** Accountability should flow in both directions, so states and districts answer to schools and communities too. Students, families, educators, and communities get a real say, and keep it over time.
- **Rigor and equity stay.** Literacy, numeracy, and evidence-based practice remain vital, and compulsion keeps a role for equity. What changes is when and how it is used, alongside levers that build local ownership.
- **Five tentpoles, one case each.** The series takes on Community Trust, Legal Sufficiency, Capacity, Comparability, and Evidence of Learning, and for each argues the need for change, the greater value, and the feasibility.

READ THE FULL PAPER

eduaccountability.org/introduction.html

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

If you're a parent or caregiver

- Who is my child's school accountable to, and do I have any real say in how it is judged?
- Does the way my school is measured match what I want for my child?
- What would I need to see before I'd trust a different kind of system?

If you're a student

- Does school feel like something done to me, or something I help shape?
- When did I learn the most: when I had to, or when I wanted to?
- What would I want a real say in about my own learning?

If you're an educator

- Am I spending more time managing compliance than doing the work I believe in?
- Where do I have real agency over how my students show what they know?
- What would make me feel safe letting go of the current system?

If you're a policy maker

- Does accountability in our system flow only upward?
- What has added pressure bought us lately, and what has it cost?
- Where is compulsion truly needed for equity, and where would assent do more?