



EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY REMADE

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



FROM COMPULSION TO MUTUAL ASSENT

Pitching a New Tent for Educational Accountability

THE EAR TENTPOLE PAPER SERIES

- 01 **From Compulsion to Mutual Assent: Pitching a New Tent for Educational Accountability**
- 02 Elevating Community Trust As the First Principle of Accountability
- 03 Proving Education Inadequacy Without the Test Score Trap: How Inputs and Meaningful Outcomes Make the Case
- 04 Comparability Without the Harms of Standardization: How Construct Comparability Promotes Authentic and Rigorous Evidence of Learning
- 05 Building Capacity for Authentic Assessment and Accountability as an Engine of Educator Renewal

For three decades, education in America has operated under a system of top-down, test-based mandates designed with the goal of ensuring every child receives a quality education. The current accountability system has achieved high levels of compliance and some noteworthy bright spots, but the lack of widespread improvement and significant negative, if unintended, consequences call for a serious reconsideration of the assumptions upon which the current system is built (National Assessment Governing Board, 2026; Wolfe, 2026; Hamilton & Gonzalez, 2013). The system has disillusioned communities and harmed many of the very students the system was meant to protect, thereby reinforcing societal inequities. We see the impacts in tangible terms: student disengagement (Measure of America, 2025), families exiting the system (Jacobs, 2026; Watson, 2025), and declining trust in public education (Gallup & Walton Family Foundation, 2026).

Some may pin the system's shortcomings on failure to implement test-based accountability well enough, but our critique is more fundamental: The current assessment and accountability paradigm is overly reliant on compulsion, ignoring modern learning science and undermining the very goals we hold for young people. A reconceived system must be rooted in the mutual assent and commitment of its principal participants: students, parents, local communities, and educators. A new system must be oriented towards a different purpose for education and support

The current assessment and accountability paradigm is overly reliant on compulsion, ignoring modern learning science and undermining the very goals we hold for young people. A reconceived system must be rooted in the mutual assent and commitment of its principal participants: students, parents, local communities, and educators.

the flourishing of young people and communities. This new system draws from the science of learning and development that is anchored in local agency, assent, motivation, collaborative learning, and iteration.

Such a system asks whether people without formal decision-making authority— those whose daily experience the system shapes — have been genuinely brought into the decision making process so that their needs are accounted for, not just initially but over time.

We use the term “mutual assent” to signal a new expectation for the flow of accountability: not just upward, as in schools being held accountable by districts and states; but multi-directional through accountable commitments made across layers of the system, including to communities themselves. Such a system asks whether people without formal decision-making authority— those whose daily experience the system shapes — have been genuinely brought into the decision making process so that

their needs are accounted for, not just initially but over time.

The **Educational Accountability Remade (EAR)** initiative represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to recalibrate. We have long known how critical motivation and self-determination are to the cognitive development of young people, and have developed new pedagogies and assessment systems that foster learner agency. Similarly, local and state innovators are developing new ways to embed local agency in educational accountability and governance. By making education systems more responsive to students, families, and communities, pioneering leaders are replacing systems rooted in compulsion with ones rooted in participants’ assent, resulting in broad ownership needed to sustain change. We believe these systems will do more to support student flourishing and make communities more prosperous, while allowing us to maintain rigor and a focus on equity.

Starting with this introductory paper, the EAR paper series will demonstrate that:

- School accountability and assessment of learning can be reconstructed to better nurture assent-based relationships essential to the learning process
- A remaking can raise achievement, enhance school quality, and reinvigorate the teaching force,
- A reinvention can reduce systemic inequities, and better meet the needs and goals of local communities.

Our goal is not to suggest a single way forward or a “model system” to replicate; instead, each paper confronts prevailing assumptions that hold the current system in place and suggest robust, feasible, and sustainable alternatives.

Our goal is not to suggest a single way forward or a “model system” to replicate; instead, each paper confronts prevailing assumptions that hold the current system in place and suggest robust, feasible, and sustainable alternatives.

Those assumptions relate to the themes of **Legal Sufficiency, Community Trust, Capacity, Comparability, and Evidence of Learning**. We frame them as “tentpoles” holding up the fabric of the system in which we operate. In each paper, we’ll suggest how to orient each of the tentpoles differently to create a new shape for assessment and accountability – one based on assent, not compulsion, and capable of producing better outcomes for our youth

and our communities.

WHY THE ERA OF COMPULSION HAS PASSED

While thought leaders frequently critique the 19th-century industrial template, we rarely address the outdated management philosophy that undergirds it: a top-down logic of coercion and compulsion. The No Child Left Behind era established an accountability architecture designed to manage the behavior of adults, not to inspire student engagement and foster deep learning, even if it was intended to address long-standing equity issues. This creates a funda-

mental mismatch in what we call the Symmetry Argument: management models dictate adult learning models, and adult learning models dictate student instructional models. We cannot reasonably expect classrooms to cultivate the kinds of intellectual risk-taking and student agency that produce deep learning when the adults managing those systems are governed by surveillance, fear, and compulsion. Agency and smart risk-taking are more critical than ever, given the transformational technologies like AI are becoming evermore prevalent in shaping work, community and family life.

We cannot reasonably expect classrooms to cultivate the kinds of intellectual risk-taking and student agency that produce deep learning when the adults managing those systems are governed by surveillance, fear, and compulsion.

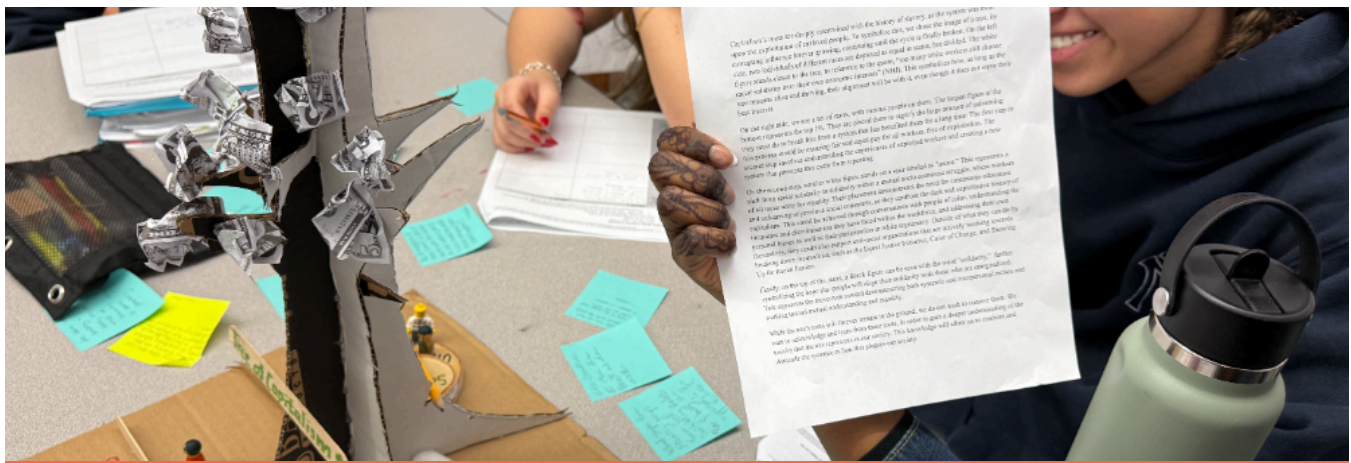
Organizational science confirms that high-pressure, surveillance-driven systems have limits and breaking points. These pressures produce short-term gains but eventually erode performance and the very sense of mission upon which systems rely (Sheng & Fan, 2022).

Compounding these consequences, Campbell's Law holds that the more a quantitative indicator is used for high-stakes decision-making, the more it invites corruption pressures and distorts the very processes it was meant to monitor (Campbell, 1979; Nichols & Berliner, 2005). Meanwhile, pervasive surveillance triggers the "Golem Effect": when people are constantly monitored, especially under the implicit assumption that they are low performers,

they begin to internalize that assumption (Babad, Inbar, & Rosenthal, 1982). The result is a self-reinforcing downward spiral that drives apathy, unwillingness to collaborate, burnout, and turnover. The current model flies in the face of everything we know about the role of self-determination and motivation on improvement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Pink, 2009).

Taken together, an organizational researcher would suggest that the current accountability regime has already produced most of the gains it is capable of producing. The evidence presented above – such as recent drops in nationwide test scores, teacher burnout, and growing disengagement of students and families – echo the diminishing returns and mission erosion that are the predictable outcomes of a management model operating past the tipping point. The current education system may have reached the point beyond which additional pressure produces *less* learning, not more.

This is not an argument against ensuring basic numeracy and literacy, rigor, or evidence-based instructional practice. Such advancements remain vital. But even the most scientifically sound instructional advancements will fail to produce durable, sustained improvement if imposed through a coercive management model.



A NEW TENT BUILT ON MUTUAL ASSENT

The first step to a flourishing system built on mutual assent is to shift the flow of accountability from solely upward (schools and districts held accountable by states) to a mutual, bi-directional flow, where states and districts are more responsive to the values and needs of schools and the communities they serve. Co-creating shared goals for student learning and system success, learning collaboratively, reporting transparently, building individual and collective capacity, and allocating resources wisely: these are the hallmarks of a system that deepens trust and creates the conditions for durable change.

We believe that a newly envisioned educational accountability system could inspire a “virtuous cycle” of improvement and development. Rather than relying on rigid compliance and punitive measures, this framework would be designed to continuously build upon and feed its own systemic strength. Oversight is still needed, but it becomes a transparent and shared endeavor, not the burdensome external validation, lagging “post mortem” reviews, and ranking and sorting that we have today.



To ensure equity, there is a role for compulsion in an assent-based system, but its use and timing matter. As research on innovation adoption suggests, compulsion is often needed to bring along a laggard group, one that would continue to resist something that is otherwise widely agreed or adopted (Rogers, 2003). Historically, compulsion has been an important vehicle for establishing equity as a key goal for education systems. But when and how compulsive policies like mandates are used matters. Using them without other policy levers to cultivate mutual assent and local ownership can work against aims, threatening commitment and long-term sustainability.

The papers in this series further develop this vision and provide practical, actionable considerations for system leaders. Each paper confronts a suboptimal aspect of the current system and suggests robust, feasible, and viable alternatives.

The paper series includes:

-
- 01 Community Trust** — Elevates community trust as not just a nice-to-have byproduct but as a first principle around which accountability systems should be constructed and as vital outcomes and indicators of those systems effectiveness.

 - 02 Legal Sufficiency** — Argues that over-reliance on test score disparities in school funding lawsuits harms more than helps, and is not a necessary, sufficient or desirable predicate for winning suits or remedying educational inequity and insufficiency. The paper suggests more promising alternatives.

 - 03 Capacity** — Describes how systems can build educators’ ability to effectively execute more ambitious forms of assessment and accountability, and the corresponding benefits to educator satisfaction and retention.

04 Comparability — Argues that the current model of determining comparability has negatively impacted teaching and learning and proposes an alternative approach that is more in tune with what we now know about the science of learning.

05 Evidence of Learning — Examines what counts, and what is meaningful, as evidence of student learning, in a way that generates real momentum for change, celebration, and improvement, rather than fear.

TAKING THE LEAP TO A HIGHER-VALUE ALTERNATIVE

Complex and multi-faceted, the leap we propose may seem daunting if not for an analogy shared by Lu Young, State Board Chair for the Kentucky Board of Education: *People won't grab a new trapeze bar until they're sure it's safe to let go of the one they're holding.* So each tentpole paper makes three cases:

People won't grab a new trapeze bar until they're sure it's safe to let go of the one they're holding.

LU YOUNG, STATE BOARD CHAIR,
KENTUCKY BOARD OF EDUCATION

THE CASE WE MAKE IN EACH PAPER

NEED FOR CHANGE: The current bar is on fire. The current system isn't serving society's goals and needs to be put behind us.

GREATER VALUE: The new trapeze is sound, and can take you new places. There's a real value proposition here.

FEASIBILITY: The new trapeze is within reach. This is achievable, not just aspirational.

We hope the trapeze analogy calls us to examine the entire enterprise of educational accountability. In our collective experience, today's system is oriented around premises that were thought to be valid when the system was conceived, but that we have real reason to reconsider now, given what we know about human development, systemic improvement, and organizational design.



AN INVITATION TO PITCH THE NEW TENT

We are a group of local, state-level, and national innovators that includes policy leaders, researchers, psychometricians, and practitioners leading this work on the ground. We believe the path forward is not found in a single organization, but rather in the unique mix of partners working together to prove what is possible. Over the past year, we have collaborated to articulate this new approach to educational accountability because we fundamentally believe this is the moment to remake how we hold ourselves accountable for the flourishing of every young person. Pioneering districts and communities are already implementing promising models. While we want to continue to develop concepts that work, we must also encourage postsecondary institutions and policy systems to adapt quickly enough to support the momentum already building on the ground.

Now, we invite you to expand on this groundwork and help prove out, test, and generate real examples of a system in which both young people and adults thrive.

- **For Education Leaders and Policymakers:** We seek leaders who understand the gravity of the moment and are ready to pioneer new system designs and advance the field through shared learning.
- **For Funders:** We seek core partners to support a coordinated effort to organize evidence and prove at scale that these systems work.
- **For Researchers:** We need help with independent evidence about effects, their costs, and the conditions under which they fail. We seek support for that evaluation, conducted by credible researchers with no stake in the outcome.
- **For Skeptics:** We do not yet have the answers, but we think the field is better served by working these problems in the open and discovering together. We are looking for people to constructively challenge us.

- **For Changemakers:** To the students, educators and families who should help shape the system - spark conversation about these papers in your circles and networks. Join future conversations to explore and advance a new era of accountability built on mutual assent.

Together, we can deliver the schools that communities actually want, and in which students truly thrive.

This paper was authored by Doannie Tran, Managing Partner at the Center for Innovation in Education, with editing from Jenny Poon and input from the other members of the Project EAR team.

SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS



The Center for Innovation in Education supports education leaders to create effective, durable, community-owned solutions to complex problems.



The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) works to end the misuses and flaws of standardized testing and to ensure that evaluation of students, teachers and schools is fair, open, valid and educationally beneficial.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Tran, D. (October 2026). *From compulsion to mutual assent: Pitching a new tent for educational accountability*. Educational Accountability Remade.

REFERENCES

- Babad, E. Y., Inbar, J., & Rosenthal, R. (1982). Pygmalion, Galatea, and the Golem: Investigations of biased and unbiased teachers. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74(4), 459–474.
- Campbell, D. T. (1979). Assessing the impact of planned social change. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 2(1), 67–90. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189\(79\)90048-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0149-7189(79)90048-X)
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum.
- Gallup & Walton Family Foundation. (2026, September 8). *Americans' satisfaction with K-12 education hits new low* [Poll topline]. https://news.gallup.com/file/poll/714026/2026_09_08_K-12%20Education%20Satisfaction%20Topline%20and%20Tabs.pdf
- Hamilton, L. S., & Gonzalez, G. C. (2013, April 22). Are high-stakes tests counterproductive? *RAND Corporation*. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2013/04/are-high-stakes-tests-counterproductive.html>
- Jacobs, J. (2026). *K-12 public school enrollment declines, explained*. FutureEd, Georgetown University. <https://www.future-ed.org/k-12-public-school-enrollment-declines-explained/>
- Measure of America. (2025). *Youth disconnection in America 2025*. Social Science Research Council. <https://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2025/>
- National Assessment Governing Board. (2026, June 10). *NAEP long-term trend assessments show different trends for 9- and 13-year-olds* [Press release]. <https://www.nagb.gov/news-and-events/news-releases/2026/naep-long-term-trend-assessments-show-different-trends-for-9-and-13-year-olds.html>
- Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2005). *The inevitable corruption of indicators and educators through high-stakes testing*. Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED508483.pdf>
- Pink, D. H. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*. Riverhead Books.
- Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). Free Press.
- Sheng, Z., & Fan, B. (2022). The double-edged sword effect of performance pressure on public employees: The mediation role of mission valence. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 992071. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.992071>
- Watson, A. R. (2025). *Homeschool growth: 2024–2025*. Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, Homeschool Hub. <https://education.jhu.edu/edpolicy/policy-research-initiatives/homeschool-hub/homeschool-growth-2024-2025/>
- Wolfe, R. E. (2026). *Can't get there from here: A framework for the start, spread, and scale of bottom-up innovation in education*. Hoover Institution. <https://www.hoover.org/research/cant-get-there-here-framework-start-spread-and-scale-bottom-innovation-education>

PROJECT EAR TEAM

MICA BAUM-TUCILLO

Mellon Public Humanities Fellow at the PublicsLab, The Graduate Center, City University of New York;
Faculty Lecturer, John Jay College (CUNY)

CHRISTINE DONFRANCESCO

Senior Policy Analyst, Assessment and Accountability, National Education Association

HARRY FEDER

Executive Director, National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest)

MICHELLE FINE

Distinguished Professor, Psychology, Urban Education, Liberal Studies, Women's and Gender Studies,
American Studies, Public Scholarship, LGBTQ Studies, City University of New York

PAUL LEATHER

Partner, Education Policy and State and National Relationships, Center for Innovation in Education

TONY MONFILETTO

Fmr Director, Instituto del Puente at Future Focused Education

PAM MORAN

Executive Director, Virginia School Consortium for Learning

KAREN PERRY

Executive Director, University of Kentucky Center for Next Generation Leadership

JENNIFER POON

Partner, Center for Innovation in Education

ALEXANDRA (AJ) RATHMANN-NOONAN

Director of School Support for the New York Performance Standards Consortium

MICHAEL ROTHMAN

Senior Director Education Pathways, City University of New York

DOANNIE TRAN

Managing Partner, Center for Innovation in Education
