

Mindless Fallacies About Accountability

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April 20, 2015

Part of the Texas SB 276 (private school choice proposal) autopsy are several persistent fallacies, including the mindless willingness to assert that accountability to political authority is the only kind. Instead, accountability to government officials is the weakest kind. Here is the latest [shocking example](#) of that fallacy:

Republican Senator Kel Seliger (R – Amarillo) worried that while money spent on public education has government oversight, money sent to a private school doesn't. "On this body of money we're going to have no accountability whatsoever," he said of SB 276 (private school choice).

Especially sad, and stunning, is that the fallacy infects people like Senator Seliger (R - Amarillo) who is not an establishment stooge eagerly mouthing teacher union talking points. The vast majority of Republicans assert belief in limited government, and belief in markets as bastions of rock-solid accountability to actual and potential clientele.

I'll save for another time a comparison of bottom-up accountability to footloose customers that decide how to spend their own money on competing choices to producer accountability to elected and appointed officials spending someone else's money. Here, I'll conclude by briefly describing two things: 1.) what ~180 years of accountability to political authority (Senator Seliger's government oversight of public money) has wrought in K-12 schooling; and 2.) the track record of recent attempts to impose increased accountability to authority.

1.) In the roughly 180 years since the creation of the first U.S. public school systems, the political process produced a K-12 school system that continues to yield '[Nation at Risk](#)' academic results despite massive funding increases, and repeated, strongly worded warnings. There have been six warnings since the 1983 original. Prior to that there were two 1950's warnings: 1.) '[Why Johnny Can't Read](#)'; and 2.) [Admiral Hyman Rickover's book](#) warning of insufficient home-

grown math/science talent to safeguard our national security secrets. With only minor exceptions, the political process, nationally, and in each of 50 states, continues to allocate 100% of tax money earmarked for primary and secondary education (public school system 'monopoly' on public funding) to very expensive schooling that leaves a lot of children behind. That means proficiency rates far below 100%, even without 'failed schools,' and 'below basic' (illiterate) rates typically over 20%, and often much higher than that.

2.) The 'Nation at Risk' warnings mostly yielded an accountability/standards approach to school system improvement. We have little to show for that costly approach; not much academic improvement, and not much accountability for poor performance. [Rick Hess](#), [Paul Petersen](#), and others have documented that the promised 'or else' for low performance almost always fails to materialize. And because the fear of accountability was imposed on a low-performing system – [roots of the persistent low performance problem](#) were not addressed – fear, frustration, and desperation produced some significant negative outcomes like systemic cheating (likely far more than has been prosecuted) and narrowing of the curriculum to test prep and directly tested subjects.

Can we please try the market accountability that Senator Seliger believes would amount to no accountability? It would be difficult to get less from our dedicated educators and ~\$13,000/pupil/yr than we get from the political accountability and resulting typically weak, often perverse, incentives that government planning and oversight have produced.