

Political Accountability Problems: Lessons from New York

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New York State has a new teacher evaluation system. The *Wall Street Journal's* [Allysia Finley](#) seemed surprised by the NY combination of a low performing school system and the teacher evaluation system's pronouncement that 96% of New York State's teachers are "effective" (53.7%) or "highly effective" (41.9%); nearly the same rate for principals. At the same time, according to the state, only 34.8% of students are proficient in math and 31.4% in English? Ms. Finley should not be surprised. Such educator effectiveness pronouncements are at least common. They may be the norm.

The first takeaway from those findings is the near meaninglessness of top down accountability to political authority. In every industry, much more than four percent of its key personnel need to be pushed into a career change. In New York, not even the officially ineffective four percent will feel such a push; not even the ones suffering [burnout](#).

Like so many other states, the New York political process produced a poor measure of educator effectiveness; in part, deliberately. Only 20% of the effectiveness assessment is based on student academic progress. Though wrong on its face from the perspective of the students and the reason for having schools, the low weight placed on student progress may represent justice to public school teachers. The current system's focus on top-down accountability and reliance on always overly narrow and sometimes fraudulent standardized testing results makes it very difficult to accurately assess effectiveness. They are employed in a system that typically micro-manages de-professionalized teaching and makes the [teaching environment](#) as unnecessarily challenging as possible without actually intending to do so.

The second takeaway is that because the school systems of all fifty states are much more broken than the educators in them, a combination of skilled educators – as effective as the vast majority of mere mortals can be – and poor aggregate outcomes such as the New York outcomes cited above is possible. It may even be the norm in the United States and worldwide. The poorly conceived primary and secondary education funding and governance strategies, worldwide, that leave the world's best [only 10-15% above](#) our '[Nation at Risk](#)' results mean that we could get a lot more out of existing school system resources, including especially the vast majority of our educators.