

Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Accountability: Some of Each, Please

John Merrifield
May 31, 2015

In 2001, John Pisciotta wrote a [great comparison](#) of educator objective accountability to formal authority (top-down) and subjective accountability to parents (customers/clients). Sadly, the URL to the published version in *Veritas* no longer works. E-mail me for a PDF of that article.

His key points are well worth re-asserting, with my bottom-line interpretation that we need some objective measures such as standardized exam test scores – what the authorities such as school boards, superintendents, governors and legislators rely on – to supplement the information that parents would observe directly at schools, and receive indirectly through word-of-mouth, to form the basis for a school choice. Top-down accountability that relies on formal, periodic objective measurement predominates for public schools. With very few exceptions, the current system makes it very costly to choose from a diverse menu of schooling options. Since there are only a few minor exceptions to the public school monopoly on public funding, public school accountability to parents is minimal. Parents that opt out of the assigned public school, and can't find a charter school opening that works for them, must pay tuition on top of the local taxes that remain in their school district, and also pay state taxes that typically stay in the public school system.

Unfortunately, top-down accountability yields incomplete, narrow, snap-shot coverage. It is simply not possible to objectively measure, even episodically, all of the factors that are a significant part of a learning environment. It is not even possible, typically, to test all academic subjects. For example, NAEP, the so-called nation's report card only tests math, reading, and science. Not only

is coverage narrow, but the typical multiple choice question format cannot assess many important skills for the tested subject areas. And scheduled test day ‘snapshots’ may be unrepresentative pictures of the big-picture reality.

Furthermore, top-down accountability, even when it tells a terrible tale, has proven to be largely toothless. Actual accountability is nearly non-existent. That is, there are few tangible consequences for relatively excellent or poor performance. I say ‘relatively’ because I have periodically pointed out that the system makes it very difficult to achieve outstanding results. For example, the system expects [differentiated instruction](#) under adverse circumstances, including especially highly learning issue diverse classrooms. [Ability grouping by subject](#) would greatly improve educator effectiveness.

In contrast to top-down accountability to authority, accountability to empowered clients would be subjective and continuous. In private schools, bottom-up accountability to parents predominates. If parents perceive a poor fit between the school’s practices and their child’s engagement factors, they can leave and take their share of a private school’s funding with them. That’s powerful, but the exercise of that parental clout would benefit from some objective measures of private school outcomes to inform parents’ search for the best nearby fit for their children.