

## Educational Accountability Revisited

Before the appearance of *No Child Left Behind* with its emphasis on testing and *Adequate Yearly Progress*, the CLI frequently offered its definition of educational accountability as being "allegiance to a cooperatively developed and implemented mission." In this NCLB era that definition comes across as being woefully inadequate and even a little quaint. Everyone understands that the real world of pedagogy, as defined by the Bush Administration, has much more to do with teachers meeting externally imposed standards, benchmarks, and indicators, as measured by high stakes tests created by companies, universities, bureaucrats or an amalgamation of experts appointed by legislatures or boards.

Anyone who cherishes the idea of teacher professionalism, defined as an educator's full participation in the decision-making and action-taking structure of a school's academic program, is seen as naive and out-of-touch. In the new world of school improvement as described by the architect of NCLB and current Secretary of Education (Margaret Spellings), teachers and principals are workers with assigned job descriptions and a prescribed curricula to competently transfer to the minds of students. Teachers who successfully transfer prescribed information and skills to students, as evidenced by the students' ability to pass state criterion-referenced examinations, are given recognition and high praise. Schools with entire faculties of such successful teachers are singled out by state officials and the local media as being exceptional. Because of their secularly consecrated status, such schools are given banners and plaques to display in prominently public places, and sometimes monetary rewards as well.

The biggest problem with this new world of pedagogical practice is that it has a perverse kind of logic, in that representatives of the national, state and local community — who pay for schools — can control what goes on in them by using evaluative tools that produce measurable evidence. Those representatives of the community can even have a say as to what constitutes an acceptable result, usually expressed in terms of test scores. Therein is the clean and precise measure of quality the community can use to gauge the effectiveness of their schools. Therein is the incontrovertible determinant of accountability, uncluttered by human variables and sociological nuances. In the minds of those who adhere to this logic, pedagogical vicissitudes associated with teacher belief systems are effectively quashed or made impotent. So much for teacher professionalism; so much for unleashing an intellectual spirit that stimulates student curiosity and imagination; so much for an academic atmosphere that engages and enriches. In this new world of cognitive pabulum all students are to meet standards-based criteria, and will never, never be left behind.

The problem, of course, is that all those associated with promoting and implementing NCLB processes are also leaving behind the magnificent educational theories and researched findings of such educational giants as John Dewey, Ralph Tyler and Benjamin Bloom... to name only three. Dewey believed that even the youngest children in school can apply a logical and intellectual discipline to reflect upon and effectively interact with their environment in a theoretical structure he called pragmatism. He believed that such young human beings constantly use an ever-growing familiarity with language and insight to observe and consider their surroundings, create hypotheses, and test those hypotheses. For Dewey, education must be dynamic and engrossing, and it's almost certain he would find the piecemeal teaching and testing of certain knowledge areas and skills only a small part of advancing human potential.

Tyler worked for over 50 years to get across the importance of teacher involvement in identifying and articulating school purposes, creating experiences for students that are likely to attain those purposes, organizing those experiences in an effective way, and determining if those purposes are being attained. While Dewey sought teachers who can stimulate the pragmatic curiosity of students, Tyler wanted those same teachers to create programs that provide experiences necessary to achieve Dewey's goals. Finally, in the context of classroom practice, Bloom followed-up on Tyler's organization of curriculum by establishing a taxonomy of educational objectives that range from mere memorization of facts to the ability to systematically research our environment, create new ways of thinking, and draw accurate conclusions about what they observe.

All three of those giants of educational thought, Dewey, Tyler and Bloom, were convinced that teachers must fully participate in the decision-making and action-taking structure of a school's academic program. To those three theorists and researchers, the essence of professionalism and effectiveness as educators depended on the teachers' ability to work in teams to consider, plan, and implement an instructional program that results in the kind of learning that is more than an exercise in trivial pursuit. They would have never accepted the Bush Administration's contention that the measure of teacher accountability can be found in the scores of overly simplistic high stakes tests administered in sterile, rigidly controlled and confined environments.

So, while the CLI definitely follows the guidelines of NCLB and other individual state mandates, and will assist educators in meeting those challenges, it also sticks to its belief that "accountability is allegiance to a cooperatively developed and implemented mission," as quaint and unrealistic as it may sound today. We also continue to celebrate the professionalism of teachers, and advocate the idea that schools best serve the community and its goals when teachers are allowed — and expected — to serve students in intellectually dynamic and responsible ways. Parents and community patrons who are actively interested in their schools will find multiple methods to assess their quality, and teachers and administrators in such schools will ensure open access to all forms of information and evidence needed.

Five years after the onset of NCLB, it is time to revisit the definition and practice of accountability. It is time to revisit the roots of American education, and strive to make our schools ever more relevant in this new and challenging world.