

Excerpted from
*Bridging the Gap between Standards and Achievement: The Imperative
for Professional Development in Education*
Richard F. Elmore

With increased accountability, American schools and the people who work in them are being asked to do something new—to engage in systematic, continuous improvement in the quality of the educational experience of students and to subject themselves to the discipline of measuring their success by the metric of students' academic performance. Most people who currently work in public schools weren't hired to do this work, nor have they been adequately prepared to do it either by their professional education or by their prior experience in schools.

Schools, as organizations, aren't designed as places where people are expected to engage in sustained improvement of their practice, where they are supported in this improvement, or where they are expected to subject their practice to the scrutiny of peers or the discipline of evaluations based on student achievement. Educators in schools with the most severe performance problems face truly challenging conditions, for which their prior training and experience have not prepared them—extreme poverty, unprecedented cultural and language diversity and unstable family and community patterns. To work effectively under these conditions requires a level of knowledge and skill not required of teachers and administrators who work in less demanding situations, yet accountability systems expect the same level of performance of all students, regardless of social background. Hence, given the conditions of their work, some school-people regard demands for performance-based accountability as unreasonable.

Throughout much of society and the economy, however, there has been a discernible shift toward performance and value-added measures of success triggered by the economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In other high-skill, knowledge-based occupations—research and development, engineering, health care, even social services—some system of evaluation and accountability has been an important part of professional life for at least two decades. So when educators claim that they are being unfairly treated by a hostile accountability system, it's not surprising that people who work in other knowledge-intensive sectors are not particularly sympathetic.

The organization and culture of American schools is, in most important respects, the same as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Teachers are still, for the most part, treated as solo practitioners operating in isolation from one another under conditions of work that severely limit their exposure to other adults doing the same work. The work day of teachers is still designed around the expectation that teachers' work is composed exclusively of delivering content to students, not, among other things, to cultivating knowledge and skill about how to improve their work.

The prevailing assumption is that teachers learn most of what they need to know about how to teach before they enter the classroom—despite massive evidence to the contrary—and that most of what they learn after they begin teaching falls into the amorphous category of

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“experience,” which usually means lowering their expectations for what they can accomplish with students and learning to adjust to an organization that is either hostile to or unsupportive of their work. This limited view of what teachers need to know and do demands little educational leadership from administrators. And, since administrative work currently has little to do with the content of teaching, much less its improvement, it may actually act to protect teachers from various external intrusions on their isolated work.

The learning that is expected of teachers and administrators as a condition of their work also tends to be predicated on the model of solo practice. In order to advance in rank and salary, individual teachers and administrators are expected to accumulate academic credit for the university courses they take, any or all of which may be totally unconnected to their daily work. Most workplace learning also mirrors the norms of the organization—it takes the form of information about policies and practices delivered in settings disconnected from where the work of the organization is actually done.

It would be difficult to invent a more dysfunctional organization for a performance-based accountability system. In fact, the existing structure and culture of schools seems better designed to resist learning and improvement than to enable it. As expectations for increased student performance mount and the measurement and publication of evidence about performance becomes part of the public discourse about schools, there are few portals through which new knowledge about teaching and learning can enter schools; few structures or processes in which teachers and administrators can assimilate, adapt and polish new ideas and practices; and few sources of assistance for those who are struggling to understand the connection between the academic performance of their students and the practices in which they engage.

So the brutal irony of our present circumstance is that schools are hostile and inhospitable places for learning. They are hostile to the learning of adults and, because of this, they are necessarily hostile to the learning of students. They have been this way for some time. What’s new about the current situation is that the advent of performance-based accountability has made the irony more visible—and may ultimately undermine the legitimacy of public education if something isn’t done to change the way schools work.

Accountability must be a reciprocal process. For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation. Likewise, for every investment you make in my skill and knowledge, I have a reciprocal responsibility to demonstrate some new increment in performance. This is the principle of “reciprocity of accountability for capacity.” It is the glue that, in the final analysis, will hold accountability systems together (Elmore 2000). At the moment, schools and school systems are not designed to provide support or capacity in response to demands for accountability.

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The imperative here is for professionals, policymakers and the public at large to recognize that performance-based accountability, if it is to do what it was intended to do—improve the quality of the educational experience for all students and increase the performance of schools—requires a strategy for investing in the knowledge and skill of educators. In order for people in schools to respond to external pressure for accountability, they have to learn to do their work differently and to rebuild the organization of schooling around a different way of doing the work. If the public and policymakers want increased attention to academic quality and performance, the **quid pro quo** is investing in the knowledge and skill necessary to produce it. If educators want legitimacy, purpose and credibility for their work, the **quid pro quo** is learning to do their work differently and accepting a new model of accountability.

The entire report can be found online at

<http://www.shankerinstitute.org/publications/bridging-the-gap/>