

How Do Teachers Makes Sense of Accountability?

Introduction/Context

In January 2002 the federal law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed and promised to ensure that all children, regardless of race or class, would receive a high quality public education. The law requires all states to create standards in reading and math and to create accountability systems that measure students' mastery of these standards at least once a year in grades 3-8. Additionally, NCLB insists that these measures of performance be coupled with consequences for school districts that do not show improvement over time. In turn, many localities have created accountability systems that rate schools based on student performance on standardized tests and that contain built in consequences for schools that do not meet targets.

In part as a response to the demands of NCLB and the increased public insistence on greater accountability for social programs, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and School's Chancellor Joel Klein unveiled the Children's First Reforms in 2002. The reforms, which have led to numerous reorganizations of the Department of Education structure, fair student funding, the creation of new small schools and, most recently, the roll-out of the city-wide accountability initiative, are guided by three principles: leadership, empowerment and accountability (New York City Department of Education [NYCDOE], "Children first history," n.d.). The reforms recognize principals as the most important leaders in the school system. As a result, principals have been given greater autonomy over decision making and increased resources (NYCDOE, "Children first history," n.d.). In turn however, principals have agreed to be held accountable for making gains in student achievement.

The stated goal of the accountability initiative is to create a "cycle of continuous improvement" in schools (NYCDOE, 2006). This cycle is supposed to be created by a feedback loop in which school administrators set clear goals that are in line with the city's standards for student performance, outside raters and school administrators evaluate progress toward those goals and then the school administrators make adjustments to meet or exceed the goals (NYCDOE, 2006).

Accountability reporting includes a yearly progress report grade for each school (A-D and F), which is based on school environment, student progress and student performance. Student performance accounts for 30% of the score and student progress accounts for 55% of the grade. Progress and performance are primarily measured by standardized tests. Fifteen percent of the progress report grade is based on School Environment surveys given to parents, teachers and students, and on attendance. Finally, schools are given a School Quality Review (SQR) rating. The review is a qualitative evaluation based on five quality review statements that the DOE has identified as characteristics of effective schools. The quality review addresses student performance and how the school uses student outcomes data to drive instruction and school improvement efforts (NYCDOE, "Quality Review," n.d.). The quality review takes place over two days and involves one or two raters from an outside consultant group and/or a member of the Department of Education coming into the school to meet with administrators, teachers, parents and students and to observe classes and staff meetings (NYCDOE, "Quality Review," n.d.). Embedded in this accountability system are consequences. If schools receive a C, D, or F for several years, they are subject to leadership change and/or school closure. (NYCDOE, 2007)

Although the accountability initiative does not currently include any official means of holding teachers accountable, the Department of Education is clearly trying to move in this direction. The DOE is hoping that the accountability system will allow teachers to make their classrooms places in which this "continuous cycle of improvement" exists as well. Deputy Chancellor Cerf explained in a presentation to the Citizen's Union Foundation that greater teacher accountability will require that teachers shift the paradigm through which they judge success. He explained that teachers should not be judged by how well they teach, but by how well students learn (Cerf, 2008). In a different interview, James Liebman, chief accountability officer of the NYC DOE and the primary architect of the new accountability initiative, elaborated, "As I thought about what we are trying to accomplish, I realized that what we need to change most was the emphasis in our schools from 'teaching inputs' to 'learning outcomes.'" (Childress & Clayton, 2007, p.5) Just as principals are now held responsible for their students' results, the DOE is pushing for teachers to also be held responsible for student learning.

Traditionally teachers have been told to design their instruction around known best practices and have been responsible for meeting certain expectations in terms of the work that

they do. By contrast, the city is now judging schools on the degree to which teachers can raise student learning outcomes as measured mostly by standardized tests and on how well teachers align their instruction to student test scores. This is a very significant change.

It is looking as though the Department of Education would like to couple a new teacher accountability system with a system of consequences and rewards. This type of program was piloted this year—in selected schools, teachers received bonuses if their school raised student test scores (Cerf, 2008). Additionally, The New York Times revealed that data on how teachers impact students' test scores is being collected for certain teachers (Medina, 2008). As yet, it is unclear what the city intends to do with these data. Although the New York State legislator recently banned the use of test scores in determining a teacher's tenure status, the mere collection of the data shows that the city believes teacher effectiveness to be a reflection of student performance on standardized tests. Once again, there is evidence of a major shift in policy.

Rationale/Research Questions

I have been a teacher in the New York City public schools for three years, having entered teaching through the NYC Teaching Fellows program. This paper stems from my desire to be held accountable for the work that I do in ways that seem sensible to me as a professional educator. For me, accountability means having more support in honing my skills as a teacher and being responsible for the progress my students make according to multiple measures of assessment.

The Department of Education is also calling for greater teacher accountability. But the comments made by Liebman and Cerf as well as the data collection that began this past year show that a teacher accountability system in New York City might look very similar to the current system of school accountability. This would differ significantly from the kind of accountability I favor. It therefore seems important to investigate which conception of accountability would be more likely to help the Department of Education meet its goal of having a “cycle of continuous improvement” in schools. With that in mind, I will explore the current system of school accountability. If this program is not meeting its goals on a school-wide level, it is not likely to be a good model for a new teacher accountability system that will help to improve teacher quality and student outcomes.

The effects of the accountability initiative are explored in this study at the school where I teach. I work at a small 6-12 school in a high needs area of New York City. My school is four years old and is in a building that once housed a large failing high school that was phased out completely by 2007. The school has 467 students in grades 6-12 and just graduated our first senior class (NYCDOE, 2008). Sixty one percent of children in my school receive free or reduced priced lunch. Ninety two percent are Black, 6% are Hispanic and 2% are White, Asian or American Indian (NYCDOE, 2008). The staff of 35 teachers are predominantly young and many are from the Teaching Fellows and Teach for America programs (NYCDOE, 2008). Most staff members arrive at school at least an hour early and at least half are there until 6 p.m. at night.

Despite this hard work on the part of administrators and teachers, our school received an F on our middle school progress report. We did not receive a score for our high school because we did not have a graduating class in 2007. Because of the dramatic grade however and the public nature of the report cards, our school was labeled a failing school. All students' parents in grades 6-12 received a letter from the Board of Education in June stating that their child was attending a failing school and that they had the right to request a transfer.

My research questions, stems in large part, from my own response to this failing grade. I had been working at this school, teaching middle school and high school for two years. I was surrounded by highly intelligent and committed colleagues and supervisors. I had always been told that I was doing a great job and that students were lucky to have me as a teacher. Where was I reflected in this report card? How was I to respond to this grade? These personal questions and concerns led to me to wonder about the effectiveness of accountability systems and how other teachers interpret and react to such systems.

Though the questions that interest me were derived from my own experience, this paper is grounded in a body of education and sociological research that focuses on teacher interpretations and attitude towards national, state and/or city accountability policies, and teachers' attitudes towards using standardized testing as a measure of student performance and teacher effectiveness. It is likely that the attitudes of teachers in NYC resemble those of teachers who have been studied in other parts of the country.

Many studies point to teachers' negative attitudes toward national, state and local accountability initiatives. Mintrop (2004) conducted cases studies in Maryland and Kentucky where schools are required to meet accountability measures each year in order to stay off probation and avoid state intervention or closure. The author used teacher surveys (267 respondents), conducted 250 teacher interviews and made 700 classroom visits to seven schools in Kentucky and four schools in Maryland (Mintrop, 2004). The author found that most teachers at schools on probation were irritated by the accountability system. He found that it did not trigger a mass exodus from the schools, but did make teachers question their commitment to the school. Teachers reported working harder after the school was placed on probation, but they said that they were doing so without conviction and out of fear of losing their job (Mintrop, 2004). Interestingly, although teachers reported wanting to raise the school's performance to get off probation, they did not attribute the school's failure to their own work. The author found that probation did not trigger teachers to conduct self-evaluation and that the probation status, over time, came to be seen by teachers as a status of need rather than a reflection of their own deficits.

Ingram, Seashore and Schroeder (2004) also found that accountability systems did not lead teachers to critically reflect on their practice. The authors conducted interviews with 186 teachers in nine high schools across the country who were cited by internal and external research to be implementing "continuous improvement efforts" and scoring well on accountability measures (Ingram et al., 2004, p. 1270). These teachers were also critical of the accountability measures and did not see the positive feedback as a reflection of their work. The authors of this study found that teachers do not use the same types of data to judge their effectiveness as external accountability systems do (Ingram et al., 2004). Joanie James (2002), a MetLife Teachers Network Leadership Institute Fellow who distributed 142 surveys to Wyoming elementary school teachers, found that teachers had a similarly negative response to the accountability measures of *No Child Left Behind* as 79% of them felt that the punitive sanction of *NCLB* had a negative effect on teacher instruction, curriculum and student learning.

Research suggests that the best way to ensure that teachers will both view accountability measures in a positive light and use such measures to adapt their own practice, is if the school has strong leadership that aligns positively with the external accountability measures, and if the accountability measures allow ample flexibility and time for teachers to make sense of their

evaluation and their goals. Louis, Febey and Schroeder (2005) conducted a study in which they did one hour interviews with 57 teachers and administrators in schools in Minnesota, Iowa and North Carolina. The authors found that teachers' attitudes towards accountability policies was directly tied to their willingness and propensity to change. Attitudes were positive when there was some flexibility in terms of how schools were able to interpret state standards and accountability mandates. Furthermore teachers' attitudes were positive when the accountability measures and school leaders set clear goals for them, validated their expertise and knowledge of students, and allowed them time and resources to carry out proposed initiatives. (Louis et al., 2005)

A good deal of research supports the notion that teacher attitudes toward accountability systems are negative because such systems are married to using standardized tests as judges of student performance and teacher effectiveness. Much of the research points to the fact that teachers feel that the emphasis on testing is to the detriment of student learning. Jones and Egley (2006) studied teachers' and administrators' views on the Florida Accountability System which is similar to New York City's system in that each school is assigned a letter grade based on their students' performance on standardized tests and other accountability measures. Ninety seven percent of the 708 teacher surveyed felt that students would learn the same amount or more in reading and math if the FCAT (Florida's Standardized Test) was taken away. Eighty percent of the teachers went as far as to say that the testing program in Florida is taking public education in the wrong direction. Interestingly, the teachers' review of the system is in direct opposition to the federal government's review of the system, which in *Quality Counts* 2003-2006, gave Florida an A rating in terms of their education standards and accountability system (Jones & Egley, 2006).

Teachers in New York City felt similarly to those in Florida about standardized testing. In a study conducted about the implementation of the New York City Grow Report system which preceded the current accountability system, but espoused the same principle of measuring student progress over the years through performance on standardized tests, 72% of teachers agreed with the statement that "the state-mandated test is not an accurate measure of what my students know and can do" (Light, Honey, Heinze, Brunner, Wexler Mandinach and Fasca, 2005). Finally, the Mintrop and Heinrich (2004) study of schools on probation, which were

being forced to place more of an emphasis on testing, found after 30 classroom visits that 80% of observed lessons did not show significant evidence of higher order thinking.

Perhaps because of teachers' negative attitudes towards testing, the research also suggests that teachers do not feel that their effectiveness should be based on student performance on standardized tests. For example, teachers in the schools on probation, which had been categorized as failing because of low student performance levels on standardized tests continued to see themselves as competent and attributed the failure of the school to external factors (Mintrop and Heinrich, 2004). Fifty-three percent of New York City teachers who were studied when their schools were using Grow Reports felt uncomfortable using student performance on standardized tests to measure teacher effectiveness (Light et al., 2005).. More than half of the 186 teachers in the Ingram, Louis and Schroeder (2004) study reported using only non-achievement outcomes to judge teacher effectiveness. Teachers in this study were more likely to view standardized test scores as indicators of school effectiveness than as indicators of teacher effectiveness (Ingram et al., 2004).

Although current research supports the notion that teachers respond negatively to external high-stakes accountability systems that rely on student performance on standardized test score to determine school effectiveness and often, by extension, teacher effectiveness, the research is silent on the question of how teachers feel they should be held accountable. What would be appropriate measures of teacher effectiveness? What type of accountability system would allow for teachers to reflect on and improve their practice?

The current systems were created with little to no teacher input and, perhaps as a result, have had low teacher buy-in. It is startlingly to me that the research does not begin the process of envisioning an accountability system that is informed by teacher voices. I seek to fill this evident void in the accountability research and, in doing, to test effectiveness of current school accountability systems. Teachers' voices will inform my policy recommendation. Teacher accountability policies that are influenced by teacher voices hold much greater chance of effectively making schools places in which there is a continuous "cycle of improvement" on all levels. My central research question therefore is: How do teachers make sense of accountability. To answer this question I need to ask three sub-questions: How do teachers

define accountability? How do teachers feel about the current accountability systems on a city level and school level? How would teachers design an accountability system that would lead to a cycle of continuous improvement aimed at raising student achievement?

Methods and Data Collection & Analysis

To begin my research, I joined the New York City Department of Education's Children's First Intensive ("inquiry team") at my school. As these teams were originally envisioned, they were to offer teachers an opportunity to discuss the accountability initiative's measures and resources. Additionally being on this team allowed me greater access to our network leader and school administrators so that I might hear first-hand how the Department of Education and the administrators were processing our failing accountability ratings. I kept copious notes from our meetings and a reflective journal to capture my own biases about the issues.

I conducted nine interviews between February and April 2008 that lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. I interviewed two middle school teachers, five high school teachers and one teacher who taught middle school and high school. All but one of the teachers had been teaching at the school for at least two years. I also interviewed a building-level administrator. I asked all the interviewees my three sub-research questions and also asked them more specific questions and follow-up questions regarding their feelings toward the current accountability system and how they would design an accountability system.

After transcribing my interviews I analyzed the transcripts in a three step process. To begin, I read through the transcripts without a particular lens to attempt to get a fresh look at my data. Afterward, I created a new document in which I cut and pasted any comments that directly or indirectly answered my three research sub—questions. After reviewing the interviews in terms of the research sub-questions I was able to find seven common themes. I created a coding chart of these themes and reread the original transcript to find quotes that confirmed or disconfirmed each theme. I considered themes findings when they were confirmed by at least six different interviewees. If more than two teachers made disconfirming comments, I would not consider the theme a conclusive finding. By the end of my coding process, I had five themes that could be considered findings. These themes are:

1. Accountability means being responsible for completing specific tasks and for raising student achievement. (Definition—Inputs and Outcomes)
2. Teachers are not held accountable (Not Accountable)
3. Teachers and administrators feel that the progress report grade was an accurate reflection of the school, but don't feel personally responsible (Distancing)
4. Teachers feel that there was a lack of meaningful follow up to the progress report card grade (No Follow-Up)
5. Teachers want an accountability system that evaluates them on the quality of their work on specific tasks and on student progress as measured through student work, tests scores and observation. (Focus on Teacher Inputs and Student Outcomes)

Findings

Teachers define accountability as their responsibility for inputs and student outcomes

All interviewees were asked how they define accountability and, more specifically how they hold themselves accountable. This research finds that teachers' definition of accountability is not antithetical to the Department of Education's definition, but it is different. Like the Department of Education, teachers believe that they should be held accountable for student performance and progress. However, they also all insist that they are also held accountable for the work that they do—meaning the way in which they prepare and implement lessons and the ways in which they complete the tasks to which they are assigned. This idea of accountability as being responsible for student performance and teacher work is described in this study as being responsible for teacher inputs and student outcomes. Seven of the teachers and the administrators, define accountability in this way.

When teachers were asked at the beginning of the interview, how they define accountability, they often gave vague answers, such as this middle school teacher who said that accountability is the teacher's responsibility to "complete the task and be successful at the task that they set out to do." Each teacher however became more specific as to their definition of accountability when they were asked, toward the end of the interview, to design an accountability system for teachers. In their answers the teachers gave away their actual definition of accountability. The same middle school teacher said that she would want to be held

accountable by people looking at “test scores, but also look at portfolio pieces, I would want them to interview kids, I would want them to interview parents, I would want to look at my lessons and to sit in my classroom over more than one day.” A high school teacher said that she would want someone to look at her lesson plans and also to “ask students questions—can the students answer the aim? Are they students able to produce grade level work?” All of these teacher comments reflect a definition of accountability that is related to being responsible for teacher inputs (planning and implementing lessons and parent contact) and for student outcomes (portfolio pieces, student work, test scores and student behavior).

Teachers do not feel held accountable

Despite this nationwide focus on accountability, teachers do not feel held accountable.. Five teachers reported that they do not feel held accountable by the school. One middle school teacher explained in detail why she does not feel held accountable; “I don’t feel that I am at all (held accountable)...I feel like when I close my door and teach I kind of slip into my own world...For the first two years I was here I was never observed...No one knows what I do or how I do it.” Many teachers mentioned the lack of formal observations. A high school teacher pointed out, “I always had to request my own observations.” As a teacher at the school, I know that there is a system for observation. One middle school teacher described a system, “At the beginning of the year, our AP made us fill out two goals that we had...I have them (she pulls them out of a binder)...I have two goals for my year...and then there are steps that we would take to achieve the goal...I feel like eventually I will be held accountable to whether or not I’ve done those.” Unfortunately, this teacher also mentioned that she has not actually been formally observed yet (the interview was done in March). My experience confirms this. Although there is a system in place, the implementation of the system is faulty.

Another common theme that emerged when teachers discussed not feeling held accountable by the administration was that there is a lack of clearly defined expectations for teacher roles. One high school teacher mentioned, “I don’t feel that the individual goals at this particular school have been well enough defined for me.” Another high school teacher complained, “We don’t set clear expectations for what teachers should be doing from the beginning and we don’t give them the training and the tools and resources for them to be able to actually accomplish things.” This lack of clear expectations and goals also emerged when I

asked teachers how they know if they are doing a good job. One high school teacher said that she judges herself by “my own personal sense of what I think is right and what I think I should do.” Teachers do not feel that supervisors are guiding or judging what they do in their classrooms.

Many teachers talked about being accountable to students and to other teachers. One high school teacher said that he feels most accountable to the students “I feel like I am accountable to my kids...the reasons I do my work, what I consider to be good work, is because I am accountable to them (the students).” Another high school teacher said that she knows she is doing a good job when she looks at “feedback from the kids...my team (of teachers who teach the same grade level) is quick to compliment each other.” Another high school teacher mentioned being accountable to other teachers when she said that she feels accountable to “hold the team together.”

All teachers were asked the same question of how they are held accountable. Although I did not ask specifically about the school all teacher comments started out by talking about accountability or the lack thereof in the school. Very few teachers aside from the four who taught classes that ended in a state exam, mentioned being accountable to the city or state.

Teachers feel that the New York City Department of Education’s Progress Report Grade was accurate but do not feel responsible for the grade

This lack of accountability at the school level is echoed in teachers’ responses to the question of who is responsible for the report card grades that our school received. All of the teachers interviewed reported that they felt the report card grade was accurate. One middle school teacher pointed out, “it’s not like there was a huge amount of amazing learning going on in the middle school.” A high school teacher said plainly, “It (the grade) made sense to me. I really wasn’t shocked that our middle school was failing and our high school was passing (the high school did not get a grade, but teachers were told that is was projected to get a B+).”

Only one of the eight teachers indicated that teachers were in part responsible for the grades. A high school teacher said, “I don’t think it (the grade) is the teachers fault. If you are the CEO of a company and your company fails, whose fault is it?” Other teachers placed blame

on the administration as well. One middle/high school teacher said, “It (the grade) is a reflection of a breakdown in the system.” Another middle school teacher said that the grade was a reflection of a “hectic environment.” This response and others that cite the environment of the middle school seem to be an example of teachers distancing themselves from the grade as they link the environment more closely with the administration’s failures in regards to school culture and behavior. One teacher did imply that the grade is a reflection of the teachers’ successes and failures. This high school teacher said, “I feel like I played a role (in the high school grade)...We all teach more than one subject here so we are responsible for our grade’s grade...attendance, the work we do for parent-teacher conferences. I feel that all that work makes that grade my grade too.”

Teachers feel that there was a lack of follow-up to the grade

Teachers expressed frustration at the lack of follow-up to the report card grade. Not one teacher reported making changes to their practice or pedagogy because of the grade. Five teachers said directly that they felt like nothing was done by the school or the city in response to the progress report grade. Some teachers felt that the school administrators needed to be doing more to follow up. One high school teacher complained, “The administration is not in my room more...There should be some kind of force on me saying you know pushing me to do better in my classroom. But I don’t feel it.” A middle school teacher said, “I feel very apathetic to our school at this point because it is doing so poorly and I don’t see steps being taken to see that we move in the right direction.” One teacher was trying very hard to find concrete examples of ways the school has changed since the progress report grade. She said, “I was told that there were some changes that were made in response or even before the grade. Hiring an AP and more school aides...I feel like there might be some other big things...Having more experienced teachers. I don’t know.” This response was about as positive a response as I could get from a teacher when I asked what the school was doing in response to the grade.

Teachers did not solely blame the building level administrators for a lack of response to the report card grade. Many teachers expressed frustration at the city as well. One high school teacher said, “You can’t ask a school to be held accountable for things, but not give the school the resources to make those things happen...There does not seem to be a strong network outside of our school of resources to help us...The DOE gave our middle school an F and what are they

giving us to make the situation any different?” A middle school teacher pointed out, “I don’t see anybody (from the outside) really making sure that things are improving or going smoothly as they should be... Why is there not a presence by the district or Tweed?” Generally teachers’ responses reflected a confusion as to why a failing report card grade was not treated as more of an emergency situation where people were coming in to show us how to do better.

Teachers want an accountability system that evaluates them on the quality of their work on specific tasks and on student progress as measured through student work, tests scores and observation.

Although the move nationwide is to hold teachers accountable for student outcomes as measured by standardized tests, teachers at this school define accountability as responsibility for teacher inputs and outcomes. As noted earlier, teachers expressed concern for their lack of accountability and a strong desire for an accountability based on teacher inputs and student outcomes. They were enthusiastic and verbose when asked to describe how they would design a teacher report card or accountability system. Not a single teacher said that they don’t think one should exist. Every teacher mentioned that a teacher report card should be based, in part, on observations. A middle school teacher explained, “I would want them to sit in my classroom over more than one day so it’s not just like getting geared up for one lesson that could go well or not go well.” A high school teacher said that a workable accountability system would entail “a constant 2-3 times a week you’re in the room for a full period not just for five minutes...in other jobs your bosses see you everyday.”

Not a single teacher mentioned consequences when discussing accountability systems, but rather, most mentioned that observations would be used as opportunities to provide support. A high school/middle school teacher explained, “I think you have to go in working in partnership with the teacher and working on specific goals and specific steps.” A high school teacher elaborated on an idea for an observation system that was built on teacher support.

I think there needs to be people coming in somewhat like A.U.S.S.I.E.s (consultant group used in the city for professional development)...people who were really sitting there for a whole period and not just for your formal end of the year observation. They were in there to actually develop you as an educator...that is what we need. When you don’t have that you get comfortable doing things that are easy for you.

In addition to extended observations, all mentioned that they want to be held accountable for lesson plans. The high school/middle school teacher mentioned, “I think you can learn a lot about the lessons from the lesson plan.” Many teachers had the idea that a supervisor could look at the lesson and then use observations to see how the lesson was implemented.

Teachers do want to be held accountable for student outcomes, but they do not feel that the only measure of student performance should be standardized tests scores or pass rates. No teacher suggested getting rid of testing completely, but all teachers felt that a reviewer needs to look at multiple measures of student performance to truly assess student achievement and teacher effectiveness. One middle school teacher said, “I think it has to be a holistic thing...I don’t think that everything a teacher report card should be based on are student test cores...So I guess I would want them to look at test scores, but also look at portfolio pieces, I would want them to interview kids, and I would want them to interview parents.” Two other high school teachers said that student work was essential in understanding student performance and progress.

In their discussion of testing, teachers mentioned that a test cannot capture everything that they are supposed to teach. A middle school teacher explained “I think one of the most important things for me to teach is how we treat each other and so the classroom environment and community and how everyone is interacting is a huge way I assess whether or not I am effective.” Finally, a high school teacher said that in addition to measuring how a teacher affects student scores on Regents, people need to look at the impact a teacher has on student thinking. He explained:

I mean it’s probably 50/50...I said earlier that it is all about the Regents but if I were to pick out my top five experiences this year...they were things that we were doing that didn’t necessarily relate to the Regents but things that I felt they were able to use in their lives beyond the Regents...if we get into a meaningful discussion about something in class and I feel like the kids are benefiting and giving legitimate feedback and really engaging the topic.

Another high school teacher echoed this idea and added that a teacher should be held accountable for students’ engagement in the topic.

Discussion

This research finds that the Department of Education has failed in creating a school accountability system that enables schools to become organizations that foster a “cycle of continuous improvement” on both school-wide level and classroom levels. If the DOE had been effective I would have heard from teachers that they saw themselves in the grade and that they could see ways in which the school was responding to the grade. There also would have been evidence that teachers were using the accountability reports to make positive changes in their practice and pedagogy. Just as in much of the research that I found on teachers’ response to external accountability measures, most teachers in this study do not look favorably on the external accountability system and do not see it as having a positive effect in their school.

This study confirms other research cited in the literature review that states that one reason why teachers do not take external accountability reports personally is because they use different measures of their own effectiveness than those used by external accountability systems. Just like many external accountability systems, the NYC DOE depends largely on test scores from standardized tests to measure student performance. Teachers do not believe that standardized testing is an accurate reflection of their students’ performance levels and of their work. Teachers in this study do not feel that standardized testing needs to be done away with completely, but do feel that if student performance is to be used as a measure of teacher effectiveness, there must be multiple measures of student performance.

This study suggests that most teachers and administrators hold clear beliefs about accountability. Ingram, Louis and Schoeder (2004) found that accountability systems were more likely to be effective if teachers and administrators were aligned in their beliefs about measures of teacher effectiveness. The administrator interviewed for this research shared teachers’ definition of teacher accountability. She said, “For me, holding teachers accountable means that I see...they are putting forth effort that they understand what direction they should be going and are looking toward those goals, they are taking advantage of the supports that are provided for them and that I see forward growth in terms of moving students forward.” This response shows that she sees accountability in the same way as teachers do in that it involves being responsible for completing teacher tasks and achieving student growth. Importantly, she also shares teachers’ beliefs that accountability systems are about requiring that teachers be willing to change and grow, but providing the supports necessary for that to happen. Interestingly, the

administrator also shares teachers' anxiety about testing as a sole measure of student and teacher performance. She commented that the "middle school report card reflected standardized tests." She also explained that "I am always a hater of standardized assessment in some way...I think there were other things that were going on that the middle school report card isn't built to capture."

This research suggests that the school is ripe for creating effective internal accountability system as the teachers and the administrator share many common ideas around how teachers should be held accountable. Unfortunately, this research finds the administrators' ideas around teacher accountability were not communicated clearly or effectively to the staff as staff reported, on a large scale, that they are not accountable to anyone. Teachers at this school need greater clarity about what is expected of them and more support in achieving these goals.

Teachers want to achieve the Department of Education's goal of using accountability systems to create a "cycle of continuous improvement." The disjuncture between teachers' beliefs about measure of accountability and the DOE's beliefs about measure of accountability suggest that the external accountability system will only be effective in achieving its goal if it starts to listen to teachers' views on how they should be held accountable. Teacher in this study agree that they should be held accountable for student achievement, but the DOE must recognize that there are multiple ways to measure student performance. Furthermore, because teachers do not have absolute control over their students lives and because no one has discovered how to raise student achievement for every student, teacher must be evaluated on what and how they teach and not just on student outcomes. This study finds that teachers want to be given clear tasks and want to be evaluated on their completion of these tasks.

Not a single teacher mentioned consequence or rewards when they talked about teacher accountability. Although somewhere in accountability systems there must be opportunities for administrators to take action if teachers are not making progress on their inputs and outcomes over time, the cornerstone of an accountability system cannot be the consequences for failure. Rather, the bedrock of an accountability system must be support. The New York City Department of Education (2007) quotes Richard Elmore in describing their accountability system. "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” (NYCDOE, 2007, p. 4). This statement suggests that the DOE’s accountability system was intended to be a system that was based on enabling and supporting schools to improve student achievement by providing them with the tools and resources to assess and make appropriate changes. Unfortunately, this research suggests that the DOE has not lived up to its part of the bargain in terms of providing effective follow-up to address areas of concern reflected in the school report card. In designing a teacher accountability system, I would hope that they would follow Elmore’s philosophy more closely.

Policy Recommendations

In formulating policy recommendations I have taken into account the goals of the NYC DOE, the research on effective measures of teacher effectiveness and the recommendations from the teachers in this study.

Recommendations for school-level administrators

Conduct four formal observations of teachers a year. Require that student work, lesson plans and student test scores be a part of the observation. The goal of the first observation in the end of September or in early October must be to establish baseline data on how teachers are doing in planning and implementing engaging, standards-based differentiated lesson plans and on student achievement levels as measured through student portfolios from the previous year and student test scores. As part of the observation de-brief for this first observation, develop goals, benchmarks and an action plan with the teacher in terms of their pedagogy, practice and student achievement. The second and third observations will follow the same process as the first, but will assess the degree to which the teacher is meeting their benchmarks and will determine what further supports are needed to move the teacher forward if benchmarks are not being met. The final observation will be used for the final evaluation of the teacher. The final observation de-brief will include reflection on the attainment or progress made toward the goals and on the effectiveness of the supports the teacher received. The final rating that a teacher receives should be based on the degree to which they made progress from their original observation and their willingness to engage in the process in a meaningful and reflective way.

The adoption of this type of system will undoubtedly require a large time commitment by the administration. Given however, that teachers currently do not feel held accountable by anyone at the school, it seems that this time commitment is essential. This research suggests that the administration and teachers are actually in agreement with what makes an ideal accountability system. Unfortunately, however, there is a lack of communication between teachers and administrators about school vision and expectations of teachers. Research suggests that accountability systems are most effective when leadership and teachers are aligned in their vision and attitudes about such systems. We are ripe for success given our mutual beliefs on accountability; we now need systems and structures to communicate with one another and have our visions become reality.

The effectiveness of this system will rely on the success of a formalized system of support in the school. The principal and assistant principals do not need to be the only people providing these supports, but they must be accountable for the coordination and implementation of support systems. Supports for all first and second year teachers must be a mentor teacher. The mentorship program must be coordinated by a staff member who is given compensatory pay, time or is relieved of all professional duties. The Lead Teacher program money may be used to create such a position. To facilitate the mentorship process there should be one less common planning time meeting a cycle. This will free up one professional period from each teacher's schedule so that mentees and mentors have time to meet. Mentors must be given one additional professional period a cycle to observe their mentee teaching. This will leave mentors with two professional periods in addition to common planning time. One of these professional periods should be used for mentoring meetings to share best practices. The final professional period of the mentors schedule will be used for mentors to meet with and observe each other in critical friends groups of two or three. This will ensure that every teacher in the building is being observed and given feedback on their progress towards their benchmarks at least once a cycle. Additionally, mentors must be relieved of their classes to attend the part of their mentee's observation debrief in which the mentee and the administrator are reflecting on progress or are setting goals and making action plans. For those teachers who do not have mentors or are not serving as a mentor, they must use their one free professional duty period (this extra professional period will come from common planning time being cut by one period a cycle) to meet with or

observe members of a critical friends group. For as many teachers as possible, critical friends groups should consist of people who teach the same students or who teach the same subject area.

Recommendation for the United Federation of Teachers and The New York City Department of Education

Negotiate a new teacher accountability system into the teachers' contract. This accountability system must mirror the system described above in terms of the system of formalized observations. In the current contract in Article 8, Section J, tenured teachers who are not in danger of getting a U rating can choose between the traditional observation method of a pre-observation, one classroom observation and a post-observation and the Annual Performance Option. What I am proposing is very much in the spirit of Annual Performance Option, which allows for the teacher and principal to set annual goals and the means by which the supervisor will assess progress towards these goals. This option must be a requirement for all teachers and must be detailed in the contract so that it mirrors the system I am proposing at my school in which a teacher is observed four times a year, sets goals and develops an action plan. Although the contract prohibits a principal from requiring a specific lesson plan format, the principal can and must look at lesson plans in the meetings as a method of assessment. This research suggests that making this more extensive and holistic accountability system a requirement for teachers and administrators will be welcomed by teachers.

A support system must be negotiated as part of the teacher contract. To achieve this, the contract must allow for greater flexibility in teacher schedules so that teachers can receive more support. The contract must contain provisions that teachers in their first and second year are guaranteed a mentor and that teachers who are struggling to meet benchmarks are guaranteed support from a mentor or administrator.

The contract must allow for greater flexibility in the assignment of teacher professional activities. Currently teachers have the right to grieve if they are assigned a split professional activity meaning that they have a different professional activity on different days. There must be a provision that allows for teachers to have different professional activities on different days so long as one of the professional activities is related to mentorship professional development.

Recommendation for the New York City Department of Education

Changes must be made to the current school accountability system so that the accountability system can achieve its goal of making schools places that allow for “cycles of continuous improvement.” Learning Environment surveys must count for a greater percentage of the progress report grade and the questions to teachers must include feedback on the degree to which they were supported in achieving specific benchmarks and final goals.

The measures of student performance and progress must be broadened to include performance and progress on performance based assessments. Performance Based Assessments should be modeled after the highly successful system used by the New York Performance Standards Consortium Schools¹ Standardized rubrics can be developed citywide or by learning support organizations. The greatest possible objectivity can be achieved by assessing portfolios in the same way that essays on the Regents exams are assessed. Each performance assessment must be reviewed by two people using the standardized rubric and all reviewers must spend time looking at sample portfolios and building consensus around how they would score them.

The Quality Review must be revised so that it considers teacher inputs and learning outcomes. Because the teacher accountability system will include a review of teachers’ inputs and student outcomes, the Quality Review should reflect on the progress that teachers make as shown through the observation notes, benchmarks, action plans and final reports. Furthermore, the Quality Reviewers must look at the supports that the school has in place for mentoring new teachers and those teachers that are having difficulty meeting benchmarks. Finally, the quality reviewers should spend time speaking to teachers, observing lessons and observation meetings to determine the extent to which teachers are using their observations and goals to inform their practice.

In a study on outcomes of students who attended Performance Standards Consortium Schools which, for the most part, have a waiver from using high stakes state tests, students at Consortium schools had better outcomes than students at regular NYC DOE schools. A higher percentage of students at Consortium schools qualify for free or reduced priced lunch and enter ninth grade below grade level and math and English than students in regular NYC DOE schools. However, students at these schools had dramatically lower drop out rates, higher college acceptance rates and high college retention rates than students at regular NYC DOE schools. (Foote, 2005)

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