

The Threat of

*This practice has worked its way into public education,
and now it's gobbling up our young.*

Phillip C. Schlechty

Public education in the United States is slowly being overwhelmed by what business consultant David Weinberger calls *accountabalism*.¹

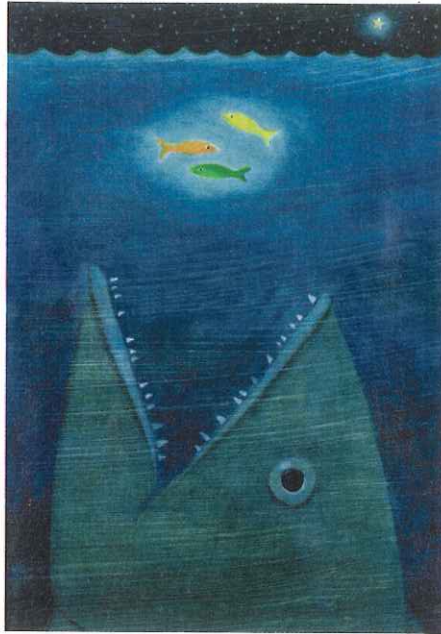
According to Weinberger, accountabalism is “the practice of eating sacrificial victims in an attempt to magically ward off evil.” He goes on to write,

Because accountability suggests that there is a right and a wrong answer to every question, it flourishes where we can measure results exactly. It spread to schools—where it is eating our young—as a result of our recent irrational exuberance about testing, which forces education to become something that can be measured precisely.

For accountabalism to take hold of schools, the accountabalists must first be convinced that we can accurately measure important results of education—and then they must convince others of this. Many policymakers and business leaders believe that precise measures of school-based learning are possible, and many school board members, superintendents, and principals have been persuaded that this is so.

A Narrow Agenda

The unfortunate fact is that relying on standardized test scores as a primary tool for holding schools and teachers accountable encourages policymakers to frame problems in the simplest possible terms. For example, as I listen to boards of education and some journalists speak of the challenges of underperforming schools, I come away with the sad impression that many of them have



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erroneously concluded that the problem with these schools is quite simple: Too many students are marking the wrong answers.

Defining the problem in this way leads to an equally simple solution: Provide incentives—monetary and otherwise—to encourage the development of strategies, procedures, and programs that result in more students marking more right answers. There's no need to worry about whether students are learning more or whether they can retain what they learn to pass the test. What's important is to focus on improving test scores—learning will take care of itself. Unfortunately, such nonsensical thinking guides much of what nowadays passes for school reform.

The consequence of this folly is that more and more teachers are succumbing

to the pressure to focus on the test rather than on students and on what they want students to do, learn, and become. And more and more students are spending increasing amounts of time in “test prep,” learning the most effective techniques for gaming the test—such as discarding obviously wrong answers and getting the number of remaining options down to a reasonable number so they can place a bet on an answer with a fair chance of winning.

Many teachers with whom I talk feel bad about being forced to do this. But like the shaman in a primitive tribe who is secretly dubious about the power of the rain dance to bring rain but who does it “just in case,” many teachers engage in much that their schools prescribe out of fear that if they fail to comply, the gods may frown on them or accuse them of the “soft bigotry of low expectations.”

Many educators sincerely believe that given time, resources, and community support, we can improve the level and quality of student learning in dramatic ways; these same educators also seriously doubt that the present accountabalist mantra can improve the quality of schooling. Too few, however, have the time to consider the kinds of innovations that would produce the desired ends. Why? Because they're pressured by the accountabalists to concentrate on getting a few more students to mark a few more right answers. Making sure that every student has a quality learning experience will need to wait for another day—at least until after students take the test.

Accountabalism has other deleterious

Accountabalism

consequences as well. Developing young people who grow up to be men and women who take pride in their work and believe in the intrinsic value of what they do is not on the accountabalists' agenda. Pride, after all, is difficult to measure, as are commitment and many other human sentiments that teachers once felt duty-bound to nurture.

The Real Accountability Problem

Accountabalism also encourages bureaucratization and fragmentation. Indeed, because of the ascendancy of accountabalism, state and federal mandates have supplanted the authority of the local community in shaping how to run its schools. Consequently, local schools that were once viewed as sources of community pride are increasingly being seen as extensions of the government, judged more by nameless and faceless "experts" located in think tanks in Washington, D.C., than by local community leaders.

No longer are the public schools accountable to the public. Rather, they're accountable to government officials—and this means to government bureaucracies.

One of the problems with this approach, of course, is the growing concern that the government is not as accountable to the public as it should be. As distrust of the government increases, so does distrust of the schools. Community trust is an essential ingredient in school success. Rather than putting government officials between the public and the schools, we should find better ways to make local schools accountable to the public and to ensure that the standards that the local community upholds are of value to students and society.

Historian David Tyack has observed that there was a time when "locally

controlled school districts were almost a fourth branch of government."² I continue to view them this way. In the tradition of Thomas Jefferson, I believe that we should view education as a public function and that schools should belong to the public just as the other branches of our government do.

Like the legislative branch and the executive branch, the "education branch" is under the obligation to live within the context of both the federal and state constitutions. The courts can and do intervene when local education

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practices run counter to those principles. However, schools should not be accountable to either the legislative or the executive branches of the federal government, and state constitutions should tread lightly on the right of citizens to run their schools. Governments should encourage local communities to establish great schools, but great schools are more likely to exist when they're run by—and accountable to—the citizens they're intended to serve rather than when they're accountable to bureaucrats in the state house.

Creating the Citizens We Need

An educated citizenry is the major check against government tyranny. To turn schools into government instruments is to present a too-tempting target for those who would use them to advance their particular views and ideologies rather than use them to develop the critical skills students need to evaluate those views and ideologies. Public education in the United States is a bulwark

of democracy only as long as it serves the interest of the public—and only as long as the citizens who make up that public have the skills, understandings, and habits of mind that will ensure that the other branches of government do the same.

This idea is important to remember in times when lack of civility and reasonableness are all too common in the halls of Congress and in legislative chambers throughout the United States. As James Madison's "Federalist No. 10" reminds us, factions and interest groups will destroy democratic institutions unless we guard ourselves against them. One of the chief protections against the damage they can do is an educated citizenry committed to, and active in preserving, the common good.

We will not develop the kind of citizens we need in schools that are dominated by impersonal rules and regulations and that serve ends prescribed by the government. We need schools that are vital learning organizations embedded in strong, vibrant, and concerned communities. We can create these schools only when local communities once again assert their right to run their schools. ■

¹Weinberger, D. (2007, February). The folly of accountabalism. *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 24–25.

²Tyack, D. (2003). *Seeking common ground: Public schools in a diverse society*. Boston: Harvard University Press. p. 2.

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