

School Accountability

February 28, 2019

Background of Accountability

- There are many types of accountability in public education
- Examples include:
 - ① Democratic processes: e.g. school board elections
 - ② Parental/consumer pressure: tiebout sorting, school choice
 - ③ Performance based: use of incentives, etc.
- We'll focus on school accountability policies (e.g. performance-based accountability) today, and some of market driven accountability in the school choice week.

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- The accountability movement that we now know came out of the Standards Based Reform movement of the 1990s
- This movement had many goals, one of which was to improve school accountability:
 - Clear academic expectations
 - Alignment of key state education policies
 - Use of assessments to measure student outcomes
 - Decentralization of resources, curriculum, and instruction
 - Technical assistance for failing schools
 - Use of **accountability policies** to reward and sanction high/low performing schools
- In this movement, accountability was the last thing you put in place once the first 5 items were well established. How does that compare to how accountability policies are implemented today?

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- Performance-based accountability policies are usually motivated by the principal-agent model
 - What problem does the PA model to solve?
 - In education, who are the “principals” and who are the “agents”?
 - What assumptions are needed for the PA model to work as intended?
- Most accountability systems hold schools accountable for test scores, graduation rates, and maybe a handful of other outcomes
- They often don't provide a lot of information about what schools are and are not doing well
- In this case, what is a big assumption with how accountability policies will get educators to improve student outcomes?

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- Accountability policies are prone to the classic multi-tasking problem
- While goals of education are multidimensional, we often hold schools accountable for at best a handful of outcomes that hopefully proxy these goals.
- What happens to outcomes that we care about but are not measured in accountability systems?
- These policies are also prone to other maladaptive behaviors:
 - cheating
 - narrowing of curriculum and/or teaching to the test
 - focus on bubble kids
 - push out low performing students
 - and so on

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Does accountability work?

- It depends ... [when isn't this the answer though?]
- Early policies that did not attach stakes (e.g. rewards or sanctions) appear to not have changed behavior
- We have evidence from three different governance levels:
 - Federal
 - State
 - District
- As with most topics, this is an area where there are important general versus partial equilibrium considerations

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