



This discussion guide is intended to serve as a jumping-off point for our upcoming conversation. Please remember that the discussion is not a test of facts, but rather an informal dialogue about your perspectives on the issues. Prepared by FOCUS St. Louis.

WHO IS ACCOUNTABLE FOR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION?

A century ago there was no doubt as to who was responsible for the education of children in our society, their parents. With the establishment of mandatory public education responsibility has shifted into the public sector and become a national, state, and local issue. In 2002 President Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act, holding schools accountable for educating children to mandated standards, leaving no child behind. So, whom do we hold accountable for the education of our children? The teachers? The schools? The parents? The community? How do we as a region hold each of these systems accountable for providing quality education to the next generation?

SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY:

Some say government should take the lead in holding schools accountable for students' educational success. Well defined standards and testing, like those in the recent "No Child Left Behind" legislation, are the best way to create and teach a quality curriculum.

Supporters of this approach think schools work best when teachers and students know what is expected of them and society has a way to measure how well those expectations are being met. Schools that lag behind have clear goals for improvement, and when goals are not met there are consequences.

Critics of this approach think it makes schools focus too much on teaching to the test. As a result, schools may drop or de-emphasize subjects that aren't on the test like art, music, foreign languages, and creative writing. They also say some local control is sacrificed to state and national governments.

Some critics believe that government can offer suggestions or guidelines, but should not tell local communities how to run their schools. Others believe local communities, including parents and school officials, should decide on their own what is best to teach—and whether and how to test—their local student body.

- Missouri currently has over 100 schools in the second year of failure to meet standards of adequate yearly progress, 53 of these schools are located in districts in the St. Louis region.
- Of the eight Missouri schools placed in the corrective actions phase, for three consecutive years of failure to meet adequate yearly progress, five are St. Louis Public Schools.
- Of all Illinois schools located within the St. Louis region, 22 have not met adequate yearly progress for at least one year.

THE NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (NCLB)

Signed into law in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act is viewed as the most sweeping federal education bill in more than 40 years. The law is based on four main principles:

1.) States must develop their own academic achievement standards and benchmarks, to which the federal government will hold them accountable. A number of tests are already, or will soon be, federally required, including ones for reading, math and science, at various points in grades 3-12. 2) Failing schools are designated as such, and parents may transfer a student out of a low-achieving or unsafe school to another public school. 3) States can transfer federal dollars between different grant programs to improve school progress. 4) Education programs must be based on NCLB-sanctioned scientifically based research.

Supporters of the law say it reforms a failing education system. As evidence the law is working, supporters point to a recent study that shows black and Hispanic students are catching up with their white counterparts in reading and math at the elementary level. But critics say many of the gains could have come from changes made before the law was put into place. They further note that the law is bureaucratic, squelches creativity in favor of teaching to the tests, and is expensive to maintain.

SOME ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES:

- Utilize “standards based reform” which is part of No Child Left Behind and includes specific expectations for students, assessments measuring performance and progress, and a system with consequences, holding educators at all levels responsible for student achievement. High stakes testing and disaggregated data are used to measure student achievement, holding schools accountable for testing results. Schools not meeting standards are mandated to offer students a transfer and may be subject to restructuring of the schools infrastructure including staff, teachers, and administration.
- Schools should be held accountable for the quality of curriculum and effectiveness of instruction they provide. If the curriculum and instructors behind it are sound then so should be the outcome of student achievement. Using tests, however, to measure achievement is unfair due to a number of uncontrollable circumstances that may affect student performance.
- Schools should be accountable to the parents and neighborhoods. Let communities decide what standards must be met, and how to measure this. Parents and neighborhoods then become responsible for implementing the change they would like to see in their schools.



TEACHER ACCOUNTABILITY

With the passage of No Child Left Behind accountability has become an issue to be addressed at all levels of education from the school board and school system down to the individual classroom and teacher. In order to have successful schools it is clear that we must have quality leadership in our schools and effective instructors in our classrooms. We must create a quality teaching force and to do this we must consider new ways of training our teachers, new approaches to accountability, new means for developing leadership, and ways to institute reward systems for teachers who have shown improvement and continued success in the classroom.

While policy makers, parents, and educators agree that teachers must be held accountable in some way for student achievement, there are many concerns about how to do this. Both Missouri and Illinois, like most states, use standardized tests to measure student achievement, but many argue that these tests are not accurate measures of true student achievement. In states such as Tennessee and Texas portions of teacher's evaluations are based on student performance using data from achievement tests.

Opponents of these systems cite that these tests do not represent a fair picture of the teacher's ability due to a number of uncontrollable outside factors that effect student learning.

Teacher accountability has always had the negative connotation of punishment. However, many approaches now focus on professional development and personal growth as a way to foster success in the classroom.

These are just some of the approaches to ensuring that quality teachers are present in every classroom. Unfortunately the accessibility to these programs vary from state to state, district to district, and school to school leaving some teachers with limited opportunities to develop their skills.

SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES:

- Evaluate teacher preparation programs on a continual basis. Re-evaluate educational standards in teaching programs to meet the demands of today's school children, including increased demands in areas of science and math. Require teachers to specialize in what they are teaching.
- Encourage performance-based evaluation in all states, districts, and schools. Develop measures that will accurately gauge the teacher's effectiveness as an instructor. Develop reward programs and incentives for successful teachers. Use salary levels as a means for attracting quality instructors and ensuring continued success. Use evaluations to cite low performing teachers for necessary training.
- Institute peer review systems and teacher mentoring programs. Peer review and teachers teaching teachers is a way to encourage new instructional techniques and continued progress and learning in the classroom.



FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Research has shown time and time again that family involvement in a child's education leads to increased test scores, higher graduation rates, and more opportunities for higher education.

How can the schools and the parents work together to form a partnership aimed at providing the best education for the individual child? This is especially a concern for homes with single parents, when parents are employed in second and third shifts, work several jobs, and/or when parents are immigrants not accustomed to the American public school system. Many challenges exist in keeping parents involved in their child's education.

Most parents work full time and with additional activities and commitments may spend only an hour or two a day at home with their children. How then can a school compete for the parent's attention, and keep that parent abreast of all that is going on with their child in the school setting? How can parents stay involved with their child's school and maintain effective communication with their child's teachers and school administrators? With increased focus on school accountability, school

administrators and teachers are now relying more heavily on parents and families to do their part in boosting achievement.

In recent years parent and family involvement has been a top concern for educators. School districts are beginning to look at ways in which they may be able to encourage parental and family involvement in the child's education. Many now view it as the school's responsibility to work with parents and make them an integral part of the school and their child's education.

Others maintain that parental involvement is the responsibility of no one but the parent. Schools face many obstacles in trying to meet the needs of each family, and encouraging involvement from all parents. Working to meet the diverse needs of each family system requires the devotion of already limited staff time, resources, and money. However, with the increased demand for student achievement, schools are now looking at parental involvement as a necessary component in meeting educational goals for each child.

SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES:

- Families should be assisted in developing home environments conducive to learning. This may include schools and teachers providing suggestions, workshops/trainings, parent education, family support programs, and home visits at important transitional periods for students.
- Schools should ensure communication with all parents, not just those who can attend meetings and conferences. Improve not only school-home communication, but also home-school communication. This is done through conferences with every parent once a year, even if it means hosting conferences at non-traditional times and places, and regular use of phone calls, memos, and newsletters to parents, requiring parent review of student's work to be returned to teacher, and parent student pick up of report card.
- Parents should be consulted in all decision-making processes regarding their child's school policies. Develop ways for parents to serve as school leaders and representatives. Parent organizations, school advisory councils, and committees for parent participation are good ways of doing this.
- Include parents in important school decisions and answer any questions they have, including referrals to outside agencies. Beyond that it is the parent's responsibility to be involved in their child's education. The schools and teachers can't do it all.

THE COMMUNITY'S ROLE

In demanding higher school performance and student achievement changes are almost always aimed at what the school could do differently, and how parents must play a stronger role in boosting student achievement. However, we often fail to see that schools are a part of a larger community, and that the community plays a role in the formal education of our children.

The resources a school has to offer its children are based upon the community in which it is located. Property values and taxes increase school funding, community

organizations provide support services, and every citizen within the community is responsible for voting on issues related to the school system. It is easy to see that community members and the community as a whole have a large impact on the functioning of the school.

With demands on schools to improve student achievement, educators are recognizing that they must rely on community support to meet state and national standards, develop new programs, and secure financial resources. Increasingly school boards and superintendents are seeking the input of the community in setting educational standards for schools. Communities, however, are comprised of a wide variety of individuals, businesses, and organizations, which may or may not

see themselves as having a vested interest in local schools. Should they, and how should they, be held

accountable for student achievement?

SOME POSSIBLE APPROACHES:

- Educational leaders, including superintendents and school boards must work to educate the community on current school issues and engage citizens in developing community expectations for individual schools. Community members are kept abreast of school performance in all areas, so that issues may be addressed from a community perspective. Ideally when a community supports standards, it will be more willing to provide resources to support their attainment.
 - **78% of superintendents surveyed reported they have processes under way to encourage public engagement, but only 41% say they actually solicit input from the community before formulating policy.**
- Partnerships need to be formed with community organizations. Through forming relationships with community organizations schools will have resources at hand to see to the welfare of every child and family in its school. Cultural organizations may also supply a wealth of knowledge to supplement the classroom lessons. By forming partnerships, community organizations will have a greater stake in the educational outcomes of schools.
- Engage stakeholders in the community, and show them how education effects the entire community. Demonstrate to the community members how achievement is not only something that affects the students, teachers, and principles, but also has a greater effect on the community, its business, its cultural institutions, and its future.
- The community's responsibility ends at the ballot box. Educate voters on how to support school related referendum. Government, parents and schools are truly responsible for children's educations and they are the ones that should be held accountable.