Meaningful Learning in a New Paradigm for Educational Accountability: An Introduction

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Abstract: This special issue furthers the conversation begun in the August 2014 of edition of Education Policy Analysis Archives in the article Accountability for College and Career Readiness: Developing a New Paradigm by Linda Darling-Hammond, Gene Wilhoit and Linda Pittenger. That paper posits that as schools across the country take on the challenge of preparing all children for success in college, career, and life, states must in turn move toward creating more aligned systems of assessment and accountability. The authors recommend “an accountability approach that focuses on meaningful learning, enabled by professionally skilled and committed educators, and supported by
adequate and appropriate resources, so that all students regardless of background are prepared for both college and career when they graduate from high school” (p. 1). This issue focuses particularly upon accountability for meaningful learning with subsequent issues focusing on professional accountability and resource accountability.

**Keywords:** meaningful learning; new paradigm; educational accountability; college readiness; professional readiness.

Meaningful Learning in a New Paradigm for Educational Accountability.

An Introduction

Pittenger (2014). That paper posits that as schools across the country take on the challenge of preparing all children for success in college, career, and life, states must, in turn, move toward creating more aligned systems of assessment and accountability. The authors recommend “an accountability approach that focuses on meaningful learning, enabled by professionally skilled and committed educators, and supported by adequate and appropriate resources, so that all students regardless of background are prepared for both college and career when they graduate from high school” (p. 1).

For an accountability approach to be truly responsible for the outcomes our children deserve and our communities require, it must support a system that is cohesive, integrative, and continuously renewing. It should enable schools to offer high-quality education, reduce the likelihood of harmful or inequitable practices, and have means to identify and correct problems that may occur.

The authors suggest that, “While considerable discussion and debate will be needed before a new approach can take shape, this paper’s objective is to get the conversation started so the nation can meet its aspirations for preparing college- and career-ready students” (p. 1).

In this issue, and the subsequent two volumes of EPAA, we hope to further that discussion and debate by focusing, one issue at a time, on each of the three elements of a truly responsible accountability system: 1) meaningful learning, 2) equitable and wisely used resources, and 3) professional capacity and accountability.

In this issue we focus on Meaningful Learning. The issue opens with an insightful article by David Conley that makes several important contributions to the needed discussion and debate: (a) making the case for the importance of deeper learning (i.e., meaningful learning); (b) explicating the importance of assessment in supporting the achievement of students; (c) providing a brief history of educational assessment in this country; (d) offering a framework for and mapping out the current status of educational assessment practice and policy; and (e) providing recommendations for future research, practice, and policy initiatives related to assessment that could improve student opportunities for deeper learning.

The next two articles add to the conversation by bringing a focused look on particular policy contexts. Scott Marion and Paul Leather provide an overview of New Hampshire’s efforts to implement a pilot accountability system designed to support meaningful learning for students and powerful organization change for schools and districts. Their paper provides an example of an accountability system designed to support more meaningful individual and institutional learning. It concludes with a discussion of the challenges and opportunities of the state’s role in supporting the local expertise required for the system to meet its accountability responsibilities.

Dallas Dance frames the recommendations of the Large Countywide and Suburban District Consortium, which has developed an accountability proposal to the federal government for use in the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the latest incarnation of which is more commonly known as No Child Left Behind. This proposal includes many of the same elements as the new paradigm for accountability offered by Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, and Pittenger.

The issue also includes four brief videos to bring both different perspectives and a different medium to add to the conversation. The first, “Success Happens at the Local Level: District Strategies for Accountability,” augments the comments of Dallas Dance, described above. It provides the perspective of a local district administrator about what is possible and what is needed for all our students to be ready to pursue a future of their own choosing upon graduation from high school.

The second is from Stephan Turnipseed, who is president emeritus of Lego North America. In “Meaningful Learning is Good Business,” he talks about the importance of knowledge and skills
beyond those tested by the exams required by the current accountability system. He also discusses the harm done by the high stakes attached to those exams.

The last two videos feature Gemma Venuti, a graduate of Urban Academy, a high school in New York City that enacts many of the assessment strategies suggested by the Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, and Pittenger article. The first of these, “A Student’s View on Standardized Testing,” gives her perspective of the effects of the current national accountability approach. The second, “Meaningful Learning Through Performance Assessment,” offers her views on the effects of the more authentic approach to assessment suggested in this series.

Together this set of articles and commentaries offers perspectives from policymakers and practitioners working at the federal, state, and local levels to transform the narrow test-and-punish accountability of the NCLB era into an accountability focused on meaningful learning that is engaging and empowering, using more authentic assessments in more educative ways.

We look forward to continuing this essential set of conversations with you in this and the next two issues.

Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder

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