

# AUTHENTIC Accountability

**Accountability dialogues bring together parents, community leaders and educators to discuss district performance and how to improve it.**

**T**he father of a third grader speaks enthusiastically about the Benchmark Book reading assessment he has just seen demonstrated.

"Now this really makes sense. It tells me what my child can read and it tells the teacher how to help her get better."

Another parent wonders aloud how the benchmarks have been established, and still another asks whether the assessment will give him information about how his child's reading ability compares to other students' in the class.

As the dialogue continues a teacher remarks, "I know we've been making a big investment in getting information about reading fluency, and that's great. But I really need help assessing whether my kids understand what they read."

Throughout the evening every participant's questions or concerns are recorded on charts on the wall.

These conversations took place recently at a unique event hosted by the San Mateo-Foster City School District as part of a joint project between the district and the Western Assessment Collaborative at WestEd. The event, the first in the series called "Accountability Dialogues," brought together parents, community leaders, teachers, and site and district administrators to discuss the district's performance and how to improve it.

In that first dialogue, the Discovery Phase, participants looked at a variety of strategies used by the district to assess performance in literacy. Then, they generated questions about student performance to be investigated in subsequent sessions.

The Western Assessment Collaborative at WestEd is collaborating with four districts and 10 school leadership teams in *Kyosei* (the spirit of coopera-

tion). The project is founded on the concept of authentic accountability as defined by Paul LeMahieu of the University of Delaware and the Delaware Department of Public Instruction. Differentiating between accounting — the giving of a test and the reporting of results — and authentic accountability, LeMahieu paints a vision of a process of continuous and public engagement.

"The purpose is to involve various constituencies in the construction of deep and commonly held understandings about the performance of the system, the reasons for that performance, the best possible ways of improving performance and the responsibilities of each in doing so," LeMahieu said.

WestEd's *Kyosei*, funded as a research and development project by OERI and

by Kate Jamentz

the Stuart Foundation, supports schools in preparing and conducting Accountability Dialogues. The goal is to determine the characteristics of events that work as an engine of school improvement.

The event is not a typical report by the school's professional staff to its outside community. Instead, the dialogue is a facilitated conversation designed to amplify the voices of teachers, parents, administrators and other community leaders. They have come together to establish standards for student performance and to better understand each others' needs for information as they make decisions that will help all students achieve those standards.

The dialogue seeks to identify common ground between two groups: those who require assessment information that provides a large-scale picture of the performance of the system; and those who need richer, more contextualized information to guide instruction. Teachers, for example, have opportunities to illustrate the power of diagnostic classroom assessments. They, in turn, listen to parents who raise questions about the fairness of those assessments.

#### Sharing responsibility

Policymakers state their case for assessment tools that are useful in making programmatic decisions about groups of students. They also must consider investing in building the capacity of teachers to gather diagnostic information on a regular basis.

Only when school communities recognize shared responsibility for providing an educational program designed to help all students achieve high standards will they be willing to invest in assessment systems that both accurately describe student performance and adequately inform decisions about how to improve it.

*Kyosei* operates from a theory of action that suggests if schools can make rigorous and genuine dialogue a funda-

mental part of their accountability system, then a shared and internal sense of accountability will drive improvement.

Through continuous dialogue we might expect over time to see:

- increased understanding of the community's standards for student performance;

- increased accessibility to good data about progress toward those standards; and
- increasingly focused and potent action toward improvement.

Equally importantly, LeMahieu speculates, continuous dialogue would renew public trust in schools:

"The most radical and contentious efforts to fix public schools are pursued not just because of low performance on the part of the system. They are pursued because that low performance is coupled with an absence of confidence that the system can be trusted to improve its performance. This approach restores that trust. It does so not just because the public can see how the system is doing, but because the public is welcomed to understand and shape what the system is doing."

The Accountability Dialogue seems particularly important today when state law requires that students be given an annual norm-referenced test. Furthermore, CDE's Coordinated Compliance Review Accountability Plan recommends setting performance standards based on combining these data with less formal classroom measures.

Decisions about which measures to use and how to weigh classroom assessments against data from norm-referenced standardized tests are at the same time educational, psychometric and political.

The Accountability Dialogue provides a forum through which local school communities explore the strengths and limitations of various kinds of assessments. They can also lend their voices to decisions about how

each will be weighted in describing the quality of their schools.

Even more importantly, it is envisioned that the dialogue will generate demand throughout the system for increasingly credible and useful data for decision-making.

No one in our project imagines the path to authentic accountability an easy one. We recognize that opening the complex issue of student performance to public scrutiny takes not only courage, but capacities for public outreach, data collection and analysis, effective communications, group process and conflict resolution — all beyond what is typically demanded by daily life in schools.

As one project participant recently confessed: "We've discovered we don't even know how to talk or listen to one another about simple things at our school. We need to get started by making dialogue real among ourselves."

#### Learning to listen

We have much to learn about issues such as the appropriate balance between informed professional judgment and public input; about how much technical knowledge people will need in order to participate and how best to share that information; and about how to assure that diverse voices are encouraged to participate and are actually heard.

The little steps we've taken to date show some promise. A recent *Kyosei* institute generated what turned out to be a highly charged conversation about how various constituents in the school community use and value various kinds of student performance data. Afterwards, the principal of a school that has invested a great deal in new forms of assessment spoke passionately:

"Until this moment, I had not understood how critical it was that we get parents involved from the beginning. I'm so thankful for the parents who participated in this institute. By listening to you, I have a new understanding of what you want for your kids and how our assessment program is going to need to change."



And despite a lengthy initial session that contained a great deal of new and complex information, participants in the San Mateo-Foster City Schools event reported a keen interest in pursuing the dialogue.

"What a fabulous way to educate more people in the ways our kids are assessed in their schools," said one participant.

"Everyone is responsible," commented another.

Participants saw the dialogue as a way to learn from others, to express ideas and questions in a safe and comfortable setting and to be heard. Non-educator community participants especially valued the opportunity for dialogue:

"I learned that there is guidance at higher levels in assessing literacy and setting standards against which all kids are measured. It is critical for parents to know about this direction and to push for literacy so that we can work with you. You can't do it without us!"

Another said, "The most meaningful thing I learned was about the meshing of interests between parents, teachers and administrators. I had not anticipated that the district would be so open!"

#### Responsible action

Authentic accountability requires more than an accounting of grades and scores. It requires responsible action throughout the system in response to identified needs. It is dependent upon the evolution of explicit and shared standards for student performance and assessment systems that provide all those whose actions contribute to student performance the data they need to take sound action.

The Accountability Dialogue is a promising vehicle to promote authentic accountability. It fuses the concepts of standards-based reform, meaningful public engagement and democratic decision-making and focuses them on inquiry and action related to student performance. ■

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