Excerpt from *Opportunity for All: A Framework for Quality and Equality in Education*
(Jennifer A. O'Day and Marshall S. Smith, in press 2019, Harvard Education Press)

Note: This brief excerpt from Chapter 5 ("Quality and Equality through Continuous Improvement") outlines several key differences between data use in outcomes-based accountability models and data use for continuous improvement.

How Does a Continuous Improvement Approach Differ from Outcome Accountability?

As in the case of outcome accountability, CI focuses on the application of data to identify where things are not working—and particularly where they are not working for traditionally underserved students. For example, the reporting of student outcomes disaggregated by historically significant subgroups has been a main contribution of Title I legislation since 1994. Indeed, in our earlier work on standards-based reform, we assumed that an outcomes-based approach to accountability would in fact engender continuous improvement. We were wrong. We now see at least four fundamental differences that distinguish a CI approach from an accountability-based approach.

First, accountability-based models usually focus exclusively on collecting and analyzing data on student assessment scores on a yearly basis. But without systematically collected information about the antecedent processes, districts—and their teachers and schools—will have difficulty connecting those outcomes with their likely causes; and they will not be able to meaningfully assess the impact of actions they take to alter those outcomes.[i] By contrast, the focus in CI is on the improvement of practice, so detailed information about particular practices is part and parcel of the analytic method. Moreover, the analytical methods employed are specifically designed to facilitate meaningful connections between processes and outcomes.

A second difference between the two approaches is the perspective on failure. In CI, mistakes and failures are expected; they are both the basis for identifying the focal problem of practice and opportunities for collective learning about how to make things better. In addition, frequent, rapid-cycle tests of possible solutions help to minimize harmful mistakes when the knowledge base for any particular problem or remedy is weak. By contrast, failure and mistakes in typical accountability systems are opportunities for blame and negative consequences more frequently than for assistance and learning. As a result, participants often try to hide problems rather than address them openly and may even "cook the books" to avoid recriminations and penalties: the cheating scandals in which teachers and administrators change student's test answers to improve their scores are reflective of this problem.[ii]

The approach to context is a third difference. Accountability models typically mandate not only the targets and measures but also the solutions to unsatisfactory outcomes, irrespective

of their appropriateness for a given context—and often irrespective of the strength of the evidence behind them.[iii] In CI, all solutions—like all problems—are contextualized. This does not mean that every system needs to start from scratch. Indeed, in networked improvement communities, trials across multiple contexts, coupled with outside research, provide information about which solutions are likely to work for whom and under what conditions.

Finally, the two approaches differ with respect to the primary source of accountability. In most education systems today, accountability is something that comes from outside the school or district. Local actors are only peripherally involved in setting the goals for which they are to be held accountable—often even in determining their strategies to achieve these goals. In CI, while there may be some externally determined targets, the primary source of accountability is internal among members of the organization and its clients and focused on the practices and feedback loops they have put in place. Case studies of low-performing schools conducted by CPRE researchers found that this internal accountability distinguished those schools that were able to improve their performance over time from those that did not.[iv] Moreover, the collective responsibility for students does not begin and end with instructional staff. All of the internal parts of the organization have some relationship to the school's core mission to ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behaviors that will facilitate their success in school, work, and life. Food service workers provide the nutrition that students need to learn, facilities personnel maintain the physical spaces in which that learning takes place, adults throughout the system help create a climate conducive to productive relationships and development of social and emotional competencies, and so forth. To the extent that all staff share this collective mission and understand their contributions to it, they can set goals and hold one another accountable for doing their part.

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[i] For a more complete discussion of this issue, see Jennifer A. O'Day, "NCLB and the Complexity of School Improvement," in *No Child Left Behind and the Reduction of the Achievement Gap: Sociological Perspectives on Federal Educational Policy*, ed. Alan R. Sadovnik et. al. (London: Routledge, 2008).

[ii] See, for example, Fair Test's 2011 fact sheet on these issues: *Tests, Cheating and Educational Corruption*, http://www.fairtest.org/sites/default/files/Cheating_Fact_Sheet_8-17-11.pdf.

[iii] Note, for example, the specifications in NCLB for schools that do not meet predetermined targets on standardized, required assessments or the detailed steps that schools performing in the bottom 5 percent of a state's schools must follow. For a discussion of the NCLB requirements, see Alyson Klein, "No Child Left Behind: An Overview," *Education Week*, April 10, 2015, https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html; and for information about school improvement grants see https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/legislation.html.

[iv] Charles Abelmann et al., *When Accountability Knocks, Will Anyone Answer?* CPRE Research Report RR-42 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1999).