

# Moving from ‘Test and Punish’ to ‘Support and Improve’

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California and Washington, D.C., are on different coasts, but events last week made them seem like different universes. California Superior Court Judge Rolf Treu ruled in *Vergara v. California* that the solution to the long-standing, complex challenge of ensuring all children, particularly underserved children, have access to high-quality public education is to strip teachers of their rights. Period. End of story.

Meanwhile, an unprecedented gathering took place in the nation's capital. More than 300 parents, civil rights activists, education leaders, academics, union leaders, legislators, and state and local policymakers spent a day in rich conversation about improving education by revolutionizing educational accountability. We delved into ways to change the approach to accountability from “test and punish” to “support and improve” by focusing on three crucial areas: meaningful student learning, adequate resources and educators’ professional capacity.

The forum, sponsored by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education and chaired by noted education expert Linda Darling-Hammond, explored ways to move away from the current prevailing approach to accountability—looking at a single score on an end-of-year test—and toward approaches to accountability that prepare all students for life, citizenship, college and career.

The disparities between those two approaches were driven home by a New York City high school senior who has experienced both. Gemma Venuti described attending a school where students would come to school crying on the day standardized tests were administered, or not come at all. The focus on standardized tests was so extreme that even English and history classes spent an inordinate amount of time on test-taking strategies.

Now, Gemma is about to graduate from a different school, with a very different approach to accountability. The Urban Academy Laboratory High School is part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a coalition of nearly 50 public schools that uses a system of performance-based assessment. (The consortium was awarded the AFT’s first Prize for Solution-Driven

Unionism). For part of a math assessment, Gemma used trigonometry to calculate the distance from her school to the Empire State Building. In science, she designed an experiment to examine the effects of stress on memory. She said class discussions, group work and projects are “fun,” and are so engaging that students often keep talking about them after class and after school—a far cry from filling in bubbles on a test sheet.

Educational accountability grew out of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was enacted in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty. Disparities in education were recognized as a civil rights issue, and accountability was seen as a way to focus on the educational needs of students who too often had been provided a substandard education.

ESEA was reauthorized in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind Act. NCLB rightly shined a light on subgroups of students so that the achievement and needs of underserved children couldn’t be ignored. But the test-driven accountability at the heart of NCLB, and, now, Race to the Top, has failed to improve student learning or to ensure equity.

Our gathering in Washington was the start of a national conversation about a new approach to accountability. It is a conversation that began with, and must continue to include, many voices—like the parent who spoke of how current accountability systems set up schools for failure, paving the way to abandon them, and the teacher who said that the tests she has to teach to and administer are divorced from the deeper learning

her students need. The conversation includes the administrator who said that there must be accountability for adequate resources and school conditions, and the education researcher who pointed out that accountability in the highest-achieving countries looks nothing like our approach in the United States. And it includes students like Gemma, who spoke of top-down, test-based accountability that terrified students and of student-centered, performance-based accountability that was exciting and relevant.

## A new movement is envisioning solutions to long-standing challenges in public education.

As the anti-union, anti-public education polarizers were, once again, blaming teachers and their unions, and, once again, writing obituaries for teacher unions in the wake of the California court decision, a movement was emerging, demanding a better and more meaningful approach to accountability and envisioning solutions to complex and long-standing challenges in public education.

The 50th anniversary of ESEA is next year. Let’s honor its goals by leaving behind “test and punish” and moving toward shared responsibility for helping children acquire the knowledge and skills that really matter.



Weingarten speaks at a forum sponsored by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education on June 11 in Washington, D.C.

Photo: Michael Campbell

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