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Viewpoint: How Can We Account for Accountability?

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how can we account for accountability?

At this time American public education, at all levels, is undergoing a phenomenon known as *accountability*. Historically, the schools have been held accountable for the transmission of community standards concerning social behavior and, for the first century of our national existence, they were partially responsible for the maintenance of doctrinal purity. American public schools have always and everywhere been held accountable. So, what's different about the current surge of accountability?

The present accountability movement—unlike those of the past—is being shaped by demands for economic efficiency. That this is the case should not come as a surprise to those who follow the shifting and elusive forces at work in American public education. The accountability movement, as now constituted, comes squarely out of the “managerial” tradition of American education. This tradition is best characterized as one that assesses schools (and the quality of education) by the utility of their “product” to the dominant economic institutions of society. It is this view that underpins and explains the heavy emphasis now being placed on career and vocational education. The central purpose of “education” is the creation of skills for the continuance of the American economic system.

However, the official ideology of American education, that constant rhetoric drummed at the general public, is that schools are in the business of “developing each individual to his fullest.” Many educators argue that schools are, or should be, assessed in terms of what they do for people and not simply for economic utility. This argument, sincere in intent, is nevertheless an inadequate description of *what is*.

Of the two views, and in spite of the “official ideology,” the managerial-business-economic view will continue to shape the direction and content of the schools and will increase dominance substantially over the next few years. One reason for this prediction concerns the training of future educational administrators. The language of business (input, output, throughput, etc. etc.) has become the tongue of the trade; the techniques and concepts of business the substance of their subject matter. But, more importantly for the growing dominance of managerial education is the fact that each lower educational level must prepare its students for the next higher level, and at the top of the pyramid are the professional schools, which *feed directly* into the economic institutions. Any major shift in the economic sphere means a change of program all the way down the educational ladder.

Humanistic educational reformers will get nowhere unless they can demonstrate to the dominant economic institutions that the humanization of the American people is in their best interest. Or, they can go to the top and attempt to change some of the social views of those in power. Don't hold your breath.

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