

Keynote address by Helen F. Ladd

Title: School Accountability and Monitoring Systems: Insights from the U.S. and other countries.

As a unit of accountability, the school is of particular interest not only in countries that have purposefully shifted managerial and operating authority to schools but also in countries with more centralized systems that want to assure that the individual schools are operating in ways consistent with central goals. This presentation will focus on administrative accountability, as distinguished from political accountability to the electorate or market-based accountability to parents. Administrative accountability systems for schools typically include standards for performance, defined in terms of student outcomes or school practices, or some combination of both; the collection and reporting of information on school performance; and consequences for not performing well, which can be punitive, positive or some combination of both.

The U.S. style of accountability, most notably in the form of federal legislation called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), currently makes heavy use of student test scores in math and reading, with no reliance on school visits or qualitative measures. The Act requires annual testing of all students at the primary and lower secondary levels, sets ambitious achievement goals for all students, and imposes negative consequences for schools that fail to make expected progress toward annual goals. Underlying NCLB is the view that the placing of pressure on schools will force them to find ways to raise achievement to high levels and to close achievement gaps. The outcome evidence to date is not particularly encouraging. Moreover the use of a status rather than a value added model for evaluating schools generates a number of unintended and undesirable consequences.

An alternative approach to school accountability and monitoring takes the form of school inspectorates with their focus on school visits, public reports and attention not only to student achievement but also on internal school processes and practices. With explicit reference to the systems in countries such as England, The Netherlands, and New Zealand, I will explore the relative advantages and disadvantages of this more qualitative approach relative the U.S. test-based approach.