

Accountability in Education around the World: Lessons from International Achievement Tests

Over the past decade, a rapidly emerging literature has made use of international tests of educational achievement to analyze how accountability affects student outcomes. Such a cross-country comparative approach provides a number of unique advantages over national studies: It can exploit institutional variation that does not exist within countries; draw on much larger variation than usually available within any country; reveal whether any result is country-specific or more general; test whether effects are systematically heterogeneous in different settings; circumvent selection issues that plague within-country identification by using system-level aggregated measures; and uncover general-equilibrium effects that often elude studies in a single country.

The available evidence from several international achievement tests suggests that several measures of accountability can account for significant portions of the large international differences in the level of student achievement. In particular, students in countries that have curriculum-based external exit exam systems very consistently perform significantly and substantially better on the international student achievement tests than students in countries without external exit exams. Beyond external exit exams, student achievement is also found positively associated with teachers' monitoring of student progress by regular standardized tests. Richer data on additional school-level accountability mechanisms reveal positive associations of student achievement with accountability measures aimed at teachers, such as internal and external monitoring of teacher lessons, and with accountability measures aimed at schools, such as assessments used to compare them to district or national achievement. Finally, recent evidence suggests that accountability is a pre-requisite for autonomy reforms to lead to improved student outcomes.