

## School Accountability – An Elusive Policy Solution: The Israeli Experience in Comparative Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Politics of accountability theory contends that policymakers are unlikely to adopt external accountability policies. Contrary to the theory, many countries have adopted external school accountability policies, while Israel has not. The disequilibrium theory of policy selection is used to analyze differences among countries in school accountability policymaking. I find that the symbolic potency of policies helps to explain these differences. The symbolic potency of external school accountability depends on the extent to which school performance is perceived as a problem, the degree to which powerful stakeholders are affected by the problem and some broader political and administrative factors. Where client stakeholders are stirred out of their apathy, the education policy subsystem will adopt school accountability policies. However, preliminary evidence reveals implementation obstacles that may render these policies ineffective.

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Schools are amongst the most prevalent public organizations. Virtually everyone has personal experience with them. Parents entrust their most valuable ‘possessions’ to their care. We rely on them to cultivate a very precious natural resource, brainpower, and they consume a significant part of total government expenditure. Any single one of these facts should be enough to inspire fairly rigorous mechanisms for holding schools accountable for their performance. Yet the design and implementation of school accountability policy has been full of problems. In part, these difficulties mirror general dilemmas in the administration of accountability; in part, they are specific to school management.

*Accountability as a(n Elusive) Policy Issue*

The literature abounds with convincing reasons about the interests of both appointed officials and elected representatives in keeping external accountability for performance off the public policy agenda. Both bureaucrats and politicians, it is argued, have little to gain, and much to lose, from the activation of accountability mechanisms that might expose their work to the public eye (Wildavsky, 1972; Weiss, 1973; Palumbo, 1987; Schwartz, 1998). Administrators' interests in organizational stability, budget maximization and the promotion of favorable image, contribute to a general desire to refrain from program evaluation and performance measurement which might cast agency problems in a bad light. The politics of evaluation literature tell us that the preponderance of political appointments at senior agency levels and the resulting short tenure of top management officials divert attention to short-term opportunities for political gain and away from long-term issues which might be addressed through program evaluation (Weiss, 1973; Bowsler, 1991). Executive authority politicians tend to be interested in politically popular take-offs rather than landings that risk tying their names to failed programs (Weiss, 1973). More recently, Frant (2000) poses the question thus: Will politicians want tight lines of accountability? Might they not prefer to be bypassed, and sacrifice accountability for deniability?

Even opposition members of the legislature generally gain little political capital from oversight efforts (Fenno, 1973; Schick, 1983; Drewry, 1986). In general pursuit of accountability scores few political points. At best it is mundane and not likely to catch media attention. At worst it risks damaging interests of constituents who gain from existing situations of ineffective, inequitable and wasteful administration. Evidence suggests that external actors are quite indifferent to holding public organizations accountable for performance. Program evaluation and performance audit reports generally receive sparse attention from parliamentarians. (Rosen, 1986; Chelimsky, 1987; Light, 1992; Schwartz, 2000). All this suggests a politics of accountability theory according to which elected representatives and senior officials ought to disfavor policies aimed at increasing external accountability.

Yet, at least some countries seem to have come down with 'accountability fever' regarding various public services, enacting a plethora of quasi-market schemes, performance reporting systems and auditing mechanisms. One observer goes so far as to call the UK an 'audit society' (Power, 1997). Popular external accountability directed reforms in the field of education include standardized testing, publication of performance measures and school choice. Israel has not enacted signi-

ficant external accountability measures for public organizations in general or for schools in particular.

This paper considers why, contrary to politics of accountability theory, some countries have adopted external accountability policies for school performance and why Israel has not. Political science literature on agenda setting and policy selection offers a number of reasons why certain policy alternatives might be adopted. Various observers suggest that policy alternatives perceived to be more visible, viable, manageable, affordable, agreed upon, available and acceptable are more likely to be adopted (Kingdon, 1984; Scherberle, 1994; Portz, 1996; Stone, 1989, 1997; Rochefort & Cobb 1993, 1994). Hess (1999) brings evidence to support a political theory of policy selection according to which actors favor symbolically potent policy solutions. He further suggests that symbolically potent policy solutions are bound to be less effective than other policy alternatives.

An important theme in policymaking literature is that policy monopolies, sub-governments or iron triangles control policy agendas and tend to suppress major policy change initiatives (Lowi, 1964; Freeman, 1965; Peters, 1986). Baumgartner and Jones (1993) confirm the predominance of policy subsystems characterized by 'inclusion of the interested and exclusion of the apathetic' in which 'a prevailing policy understanding prevails'. Yet evidence from several American case studies leads Baumgartner and Jones to conclude that apathetic citizens can be and are often mobilized to place issues on the policy agenda, bring about policy change and even change the makeup of policy subsystems. To understand this process Baumgartner and Jones introduce the concept of policy image. Following Deborah Stone (1989), they suggest that the portrayal of conditions as problems mobilizes apathetic stakeholders to become involved. Certain policy alternatives become popular when portrayed as the most effective solutions to the perceived problem. When policy image is such that there is both a perceived problem and a perceived viable solution, the system is said to be in disequilibrium – a state with high potential for change.

Thus, policy image is a key variable in assessing the likelihood that external accountability policy will be adopted despite the politics of accountability. More explicitly, it will become politically attractive to enact external accountability policy when the policy image is such that school performance is considered poor and external accountability measures are considered an effective solution.

The paper will show that school performance was considered a problem in need of solution and external school accountability measures were considered symbolically potent policy solutions in countries such as the United States and Britain, but not in Israel. The policy image

of school performance in Israel meets only one of the two conditions necessary to create the environment for a change in policy direction. School performance is indeed considered problematic. But, external accountability policy is not considered the most effective solution for solving the problem. The paper assesses the influence of a number of additional environmental variables that affect the formulation and implementation of accountability policy either directly or by way of their influence on policy image. The literature suggests that proclivity to introduce external accountability measures is linked to a number of environmental variables: agenda overload (Dror, 1988); general accountability culture (Sharkansky, 1985); government and legislative structure (Sharkansky, 1993; Knill, 1999); and existence of general managerial reform policies. Placing Israel along these variables demonstrates that Israel's political and administrative environments are generally not conducive to the adoption of external accountability policies.

Using agenda setting and policy selection theories, I consider why, contrary to politics of accountability theory, some countries have adopted external accountability policies for school performance and why Israel has not. Inbar (1986) describes Israel as having an 'education inner circle of power' which includes top educational administrators, academicians, public figures, teachers' union representatives, and politicians. Elboim-Dror (1985) traces most policy initiatives to Ministry of Education officials whose ideas are accepted by senior officials close to the Director-General and the Minister. The dominant policy player is the Ministry of Education. Neither the Government nor the Knesset play an active role in initiating or formulating education policy. When they do address policy issues, they tend to draw rough sketches, leaving to the Ministry a great deal of play in interpretation and execution. While teachers' unions are not actively involved in initiating policy change, they do play an important role in policy formulation, mainly to protect working conditions.

While the focus is on the Israeli case, the perspective is comparative. I explore further whether where school performance accountability policies have been adopted, they have been effectively implemented. This exploration of school accountability policy selection serves to broaden general understanding of recent developments in the use of external accountability mechanisms and especially of differences amongst countries.

### *1 Defining Accountability*

Accountability is a complex construction encompassing numerous combinations of: things to be held accountable for; people to be held

TABLE 1: *Accountability Relationships*

Type of Accountability	Accountability Relationship	Expression of Accountability Relationship in Education
Hierarchical	Superior/subordinate, supervision	Education authorities establish rules & regulations
Professional	Deference to expertise	Certification exams, professional standards of practice
Political	Responsiveness to constituents	Parental and community representation
	Competition and exit opportunities	School choice

accountable; bodies to be held accountable to; and means of holding people to account (Table 1). Several accountability typologies appear in recent public administration literature (Romzek, 2000; Stone, 1995; DeLeon, 1998; Thomas, 1998). While there are some differences in labeling and in groupings, the most common and significant categories are: hierarchical, professional, political, legal, and market. Romzek and Dubnick (1987, 1994) distinguish between internal accountability (hierarchical and professional) and external accountability (political and legal). Market accountability is subsumed under political accountability. Legal accountability is excluded from this analysis, as it does not generally apply to questions of performance. Recent examinations of school accountability delineate typologies similar to those found in public administration literature (Darling-Hammond, 1989; Farrel & Law, 1999).

Alone, none of these accountability types is able to provide complete school accountability. A complete school accountability system would include: (1) information about three types of performance: academic achievement, other student outcomes, teaching processes; 2) standards for judging success based on performance measures; 3) rewards and sanctions to school principal and to individual teachers for success and failure relative to specified standards; 4) an agent or constituency that receives information on performance, judges the extent to which standards have been met, and distributes rewards and sanctions (cf. Newman, King & Rigdon, 1997).

The exploration of the Israeli case uses several sources of data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 senior officials and policymakers in the education system. Forty-three inspectors (38%) mailed-in questionnaires about inspection practices, achievement testing and publication of test results, and I reviewed Knesset Plenum and Knesset Education Committee protocols for the period 1992–1999. The study also utilizes data from previously published surveys. Second-

ary sources enable comparison of the Israeli experience with that of other countries, primarily the United States and Britain.

### *Internal Accountability*

Internal accountability mechanisms are those that do not disseminate performance information to central authorities, to the legislature or to the public eye. As such, they do not constitute threats to members of the policy subsystem. There are two major types of internal accountability, professional and hierarchical.

When applied to schools, *professional accountability* entails trusting the expertise of teachers, principals and perhaps inspectors (Farrel & Law, 1999). In return, teachers and other education professionals must acquire specialized knowledge, pass certification exams, and uphold professional standards of practice (Darling-Hammond, 1989).

Professionalism in the delivery of public services was a key feature of the dramatic expansion in the size and complexity of government, which broke the traditional chain of accountability (Day & Klein, 1987). Instead, there was an increasing reliance on the professionalism of key service providers to ensure that services would be properly delivered. Doctors, police officers, social workers and teachers were trusted to provide quality performance because their training, it was thought, provided them with the necessary expertise, norms of behavior and public service ethos.

For most of the twentieth century, professional accountability can be seen as the fallback accountability mechanism. Professional accountability in the education system might be expected to prevail so long as the professionalism of teachers is respected. An OECD (1995) analysis suggests that the extent to which teachers are perceived to be 'professional' is an important predictor of calls for other forms of accountability in Germany, France and, to a certain extent, Sweden. 'Consequently governments find it harder to put pressure on teachers – but they feel less need to. . . . It is clear that in England, the United States and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand, where education reforms have been most far-reaching and sometimes resisted by teachers, the teaching profession has a relatively low status in terms of pay and qualifications' (OECD, 1995).

The status of teachers in Israel underwent extensive change over the course of time. In the pre-state era, teaching was a high status profession, attracting intellectuals from various walks of life (Elboim-Dror, 1985). Mass immigration following Independence necessitated 'emergency' training of large numbers of teachers. Standards for trainees were drastically reduced and the training was largely inadequate. Con-

sequentially, the status, authority and prestige previously enjoyed by the teaching profession deteriorated significantly.

The low status of teachers became an issue on the public policy agenda only after a six week long strike in 1978. The Government appointed a national commission to investigate the status of teachers and the teaching profession. Amongst the claims put forth before the commission were: the need to attract better quality teachers; the low salaries of teachers; and the high number of non-accredited teachers working in the educational system (Report of the national commission for examining the status of teachers and the teaching profession, 1979). It is telling that the Commission did not entertain alternative accountability mechanisms as a solution to the problem. Rather, Commission recommendations focused on direct measures to improve the professional standing of teachers.

Partially as a result of the implementation of some of the Commission recommendations, the professional status of teachers in Israel has been enhanced with considerable improvements in admission requirements to teacher training programs and upgrading of the training to academic standards, culminating in a bachelor of education degree. Yet, the status of the teaching profession in the eyes of the public is still quite low, as is the general level of satisfaction with the educational system. A 1993 survey of Israeli citizens found that in their eyes, the ‘difficulty of getting good teachers’ and ‘lack of respect for teachers’ are among the most pressing problems in the education system and 81% of respondents support or strongly support increasing teachers’ salaries (Tsidkiyahu, 1993).

It is clear that in Israel there is not much respect for the professionalism of teachers, leading to an expectation of alternative accountability policies. A logical place to start the search is with hierarchical accountability – an internal accountability mechanism that doesn’t pose threats to members of the education policy subsystem.

#### *Hierarchical accountability*

Darling-Hammond (1989) defines bureaucratic accountability as the promulgation by district and state education offices of rules and regulations intended to ensure that schooling takes place according to set standards. This definition captures the essence of classical public administration hierarchical accountability systems and represents the major school accountability mechanism in the United States for much of this century.

There are good reasons to expect to find developed hierarchic administrative accountability mechanisms in Israel. The professional status

of teachers is low. School and community based governing structures are non-existent or very weak. And Israel has established a highly centralized educational system to deal with mass immigration and accelerated expansion. In these characteristics, Israel is quite similar to the United States for much of this century. And, on the surface, the two countries appear to have adopted similar accountability approaches.

Over the years, American government officials created a myriad of federal and state laws, district and local rules that determine in detail what is to be taught when and how. Michael Katz (1971) describes a highly hierarchic accountability system from as far back as the 1870s. American officials were not content with promulgating rules and regulations, but also devised means of ensuring compliance: 'Through bureaucracy, federal officials can strategically reduce the discretion of school personnel by specifying the kinds of behavior they want – and requiring them by law . . . they can impose information-collection, reporting, and monitoring requirements as means of holding schools accountable for their performance, and they can impose sanctions for noncompliance (Chubb & Moe, 1990)'.

Israel too developed a highly centralized bureaucratic educational system, but did little to ensure compliance. Until the 1980s this system was characterized by centralized curricular directives and detailed regulations concerning such processes of teaching as hours, methods and numbers of pupils in classes (Lazin, 1987). Israel's State Comptroller demonstrates that even in 1997, school budgeting was highly centralized, with up to 140 line items with no discretion for schools to transfer funds (State Comptroller's Office, 1998).

Ostensibly, a national system of school inspection, operated by the Ministry of Education, has a broad legal mandate to enforce compliance with centrally determined input and process regulations. Inspection duties included, for example: checking the physical condition of school buildings and equipment; and ensuring that the teaching accords with the national curriculum. However, these seemingly strong tools of bureaucratic process accountability encounter formidable implementation obstacles.

The State Comptroller's Office, Israel's supreme state audit institution, reports that the workload of Ministry of Education inspectors prevents them from conducting ongoing systematic inspection of all the areas that fall under their remit. On average, each inspector is responsible for 21 schools in six separate local authorities that employ 621 teachers. As a result, each inspector picks and choose on what to focus (State Comptroller's Office, 1994). Interviews with inspectors confirm that inspection is conducted in a haphazard way: "I as an inspector almost never demand reports and am not requested to report myself.



Once in a while, in some momentary caprice, the whole system works hysterically in order to check a certain topic, but in fact nothing is done with the data.”

Questionnaire data shows that inspection results are used more for the purposes of identifying needs for teacher improvement than for enforcing compliance with regulations. 79% of inspectors report that poor inspection results led to increased resources for teacher counseling and in-service teacher training, while none reported sanctioning schools who fared poorly by decreasing discretionary funding.

This picture of Israel’s school inspection suggests that it is, for the most part, a mechanism of professional, rather than hierarchic, accountability. There is no systematic monitoring and reporting of school performance by inspectors to their superiors, to parents or to Local Authorities. Rather, they inform teachers and principals of the results of inspections and work with them in an advisory capacity.

#### *External Accountability*

Neither professional nor hierarchical accountability pose politics of accountability threats to members of the education policy subsystem. Nor do they provide accountability to the public either directly or through their representatives. Demand for external accountability of school performance is predominantly a creature of the last two to three decades. For much of the twentieth century there was, it seems, general contentment with deference to professionalism in England and hierarchical accountability in the U.S. Some observers attribute this state of content to the need for education systems in this period to cope with expanding the supply of schooling to keep up with the baby-boom and with the growth in participation in secondary schooling (Macpherson, 1996). The work of nation-building, including absorbing immigrants who more than doubled the size of the population helps to explain the weaknesses found in Israel to the accountability types considered so far.

Professional and hierarchical accountability focused on teaching processes, ignoring the other types of performance included the operative definition of complete school accountability – academic achievement and other student outcomes. To the extent that monitoring of school achievement occurred, it remains at the level of education professionals or at most district level officials. This suited well the members of education policy subsystems – teachers, principals and education officials at various levels of government and administration. In accordance with the politics of accountability theory these players had no interest in initiating mechanisms that would provide school performance informa-

tion to ‘outsiders’. Other players – central executive authority officials, legislatures, parents and the general public – were apathetic, apparently not perceiving a problem in need of policy change.

Enter the perception of a problem in need of solution. Numerous books and articles describe growing dissatisfaction with school performance starting in the 1970s and 1980s. They identify several sources of discontent, including: “post-Sputnik concerns for math & science achievements” (Cibulka & Derlin, 1995); disappointing results for American and British students in math and science as compared to Germany, Japan, Singapore and Korea in international studies (OECD, 1995); local reports of high dropout rates and overall low student achievement (Newmann, King and Rigdon, 1997); the Coleman Report (Macpherson, 1996). In the United States, business leaders blamed poor schooling for the loss of America’s competitive edge (Mintrom & Vergari, 1997).

In Israel too, school performance is widely considered a policy problem. A public opinion survey conducted in 1993, for example, found that 79% of respondents considered poor teaching quality a significant problem and 73% considered the level of studies too low. (Tsidkiyahu, 1993) Representatives of the Ministry of Education, teachers’ unions and parent organizations confirmed these findings in face to face interviews. And public response to national achievement tests in 1992 suggested an educational system in crisis.

All these contributed to the development of a policy image of school performance as a problem in need of a solution. In short, the perceived problem of school performance became an issue on the public agenda in many countries. Prominent solutions in the United States, Britain and elsewhere include strengthening external accountability in the form of publishing school level performance reporting, and strengthening political accountability especially through school choice. The popularity of these particular policy solutions can be associated with their prominence in more general public administration reform measures. Output and outcome based management and the introduction of quasi-market are central to new public management type reforms in Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and a host of other countries.

### *Performance Reporting*

School performance reporting systems provide data on various outputs and outcomes. By far, the most common school performance measure is some test of student academic achievement. Other measures include attendance, drop-out rates and graduate destinations. Performance

monitoring might be used as a tool for both hierarchical accountability and political accountability (Ladd, 1996). National or regional testing whose results are not published at school level serve the hierarchical accountability system and may be used for administrative reward and sanction schemes. When school level results become publicly available, parents and community representatives may use them in the political accountability system through the exercise of voice or exit.

Monitoring of school performance first became popular in the United States in the 1970s. Arthur Wise (1979) counts no less than 73 state laws calling for the application of performance based management systems to schools. Thirty-three states required minimum competency testing by mid-1978. According to a 1995 OECD report, over 40 new state testing programs were initiated during the 1980s and by 1993, 42 states reported on school test scores (OECD, 1995). In England, legislative measures mandate external testing schemes at ages 7, 14 and 16 and require the monitoring of attendance/truancy ratios and destinations of school-leavers (Williams, 1997). In Canada, Ontario's EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) conducts testing in math, reading and writing of grade 3, 6 & 9 students (Mawhinney, 1998).

A number of countries progressed from internal to external accountability by mandating the publication of school performance results. The rationale is to provide 'customers' or 'clients' with comparative performance information that enables them to use 'voice' intelligently in efforts to improve the performance of their schools or to exercise 'exit' where school choice is offered.

British legislation, for example, requires the publication of 'educational performance tables' that include standardized test results, pupils attendance/truancy ratios and destinations of school-leavers. In addition, school inspection results are distributed to all parents, placed in the local library and posted on the internet. (Williams, 1997) A survey in the United States found that, twenty-eight states published school-level test data (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1994). France publishes performance indicators at the lycée level (OECD, 1995). And New Zealand publishes the results of effectiveness reviews, including educational attainment conducted by the Educational Review Office (OECD, 1995). Freedom of information legislation now requires Ontario to publish school level results (Mawhinney, 1998).

As a result of these measures, education officials, parents and community representatives now have available to them comparative data on school performance. Despite significant problems of comparison, this data provides stakeholders with real possibilities for holding schools to account for their performance. Numerous examples demon-

strate the use of this data in systems of administrative rewards and sanctions, the exercise of voice through school governors and board members, and the exercise of exit through school choice opportunities. This apparently successful implementation of accountability policy suggests that a strong enough policy image can overcome politics of accountability obstacles to the formulation and implementation of external accountability policies.

Several research findings reported in the literature temper this tentative conclusion. School performance monitoring policies in the United States, for example, were initiated by Federal and senior state level politicians with political interests in enacting popular policy solutions. In some places, the implementation of these policies however has faced some opposition by stakeholders affected by politics of accountability considerations (Cohen, 1996; Elmore, Abelman & Fuhrman, 1996; Mintrom & Vergari, 1997). The research literature on this issue is quite sparse and does not allow for the drawing of generalizations. We do not know where politics of accountability considerations have been strong, weak or non-existent or what the reasons might be for such variance. What we do have is sufficient only to show the possibility that politics of accountability considerations at the implement stage might render ineffective (elusive) performance accountability policies formulated at higher levels.

Stakeholder politics of accountability resistance to school accountability policies have been evident in examples from the United States, England, Wales and Australia. In the United States, district and local forces have exerted significant pressures in order to thwart potentially damaging consequences of state initiated school performance reporting schemes. (OERI State Accountability Study Group, 1998) Cibulka & Derlin (1995) provide illuminating examples:

When Pennsylvania officials reported state achievement test results in rank order, they encountered a storm of controversy, particularly from districts who claimed the playing field was not level if they had many economically and socially disadvantaged, or at-risk children and inadequate resources. Yet, reporting the results by grouping together districts that have similar socio-economic (and other) characteristics is also controversial. Many states report that they considered such approaches (which are used in some states such as South Carolina) but ultimately rejected this approach because of criticism that grouping lowers expectations or justifies existing performance differences.

Elmore, Abelman and Fuhrman (1996) provide examples from a number of states where political opposition has hindered the implementation of performance-based reward and sanction systems. They describe how pressures from 'school people' often force legislators and

governors to backtrack on performance accountability policies perceived as potentially harmful to particular schools and legislative districts. For example, in response to such pressures, the Kentucky State legislature postponed sanctions for schools that scored below minimum levels on state performance measures. Similarly, in Mississippi the state declined taking over into ‘conservatorship’ school districts that scored poorly. Elmore et al’s respondents explained that, ‘the political flak was not worth the effort’. David K. Cohen (1996) notes that stakeholder opposition is responsible for the fact that school performance schemes in all but a few states do not link performance results with rewards and sanctions.

In England and Wales there has been ever-increasing opposition to the publication of exam results for different age groups. Teachers and parent groups opposed the publication of exam results for seven-year-olds in 1990 and for 16-year-olds in 1992. By 1993 when examinations for 14-year-olds were scheduled, opposition escalated sharply (Williams, 1997). Survey data showed that two-thirds of parents surveyed were opposed to testing at the age of seven years and 51% supported the decision taken by all teachers’ associations to boycott the national tests for pupils of 14 years of age. Local opposition to league table publication of exam results precipitated moves by at least two Welsh local education authorities to develop alternative performance information systems that include value-added data for the use of, “schools in order to help them improve their performance, rather than for parents or politicians”. (Farrel and Law, 1999)

Cuttance et al. (1998) attribute the failure to implement and sustain school-level performance reporting systems in Australian states predominantly to, “fear by entrenched senior State education bureaucrats (and Ministers) that accountability processes and outcomes might produce unwanted scrutiny (from the Federal Government, the public or others), loss of control and embarrassment to themselves”.

Perceptions of a problem – even a crisis – regarding school achievements in a number of countries provided the impetus for establishing performance monitoring. In Israel there is much bickering about school performance and survey data confirm low satisfaction (Tsidkiyahu, 1993). Yet, stakeholder representatives (i.e. parent organizations) have not made an issue of school performance. To the extent that they have developed at all, school performance monitoring schemes did not arise as a policy response to a perceived performance problem. Rather, in accordance with Elboim-Dror’s illustration of Israeli education policymaking, initiatives for performance monitoring originated within the Ministry of Education.

Monitoring of education was virtually non-existent as of 1978

(Report of the Commission for Examining the Establishment of a Feedback System in the Ministry of Education and Culture, 1981). In that year, the Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Education established a commission to investigate the need for performance monitoring. The inspiration for this initiative came from the desire to 'be like the Americans' (Razel, 1996). There was no call for such testing from the public, from the legislature, from central executive agencies (like the Ministry of Finance) or from parents' groups. Rather it was an inside job spurred by the professionalism of the Chief Scientist.

The unraveling of the story line of performance testing in Israeli schools reflects well the elusiveness of school accountability policy. As a result of the Commission's recommendations the Ministry conducted its first round of minimum achievement tests in 1983. Their primary stated purpose was to identify schools in need of special treatment. Only nationally amalgamated results were published. 9.6% of grade three pupils failed the minimum competency in reading comprehension and 4.7% failed in math. These results were generally perceived to indicate a crisis situation and aroused a loud public outcry (Razel, 1996).

In a way then, what was the solution (performance monitoring) in other countries preceded and actually kindled the perception of the problem (poor school performance) in Israel. A logical corollary would be public pressure to continue monitoring school performance as part of the solution to the perceived problem. Yet, after the second year of testing the Ministry canceled the tests claiming that there was no use identifying schools in need of treatment when there were no resources that could be channeled for this purpose (Razel, 1996). Stakeholder groups did little to dissuade the Ministry. The Knesset Education Committee didn't even discuss the issue.

In 1991, the Chief Scientist initiated a second round of achievement testing. These tests aimed to provide both the Ministry and individual schools with feedback on academic achievements in order to diagnose problems and rationalize resource allocation to treat revealed problems. As in the previous round of testing, there was no intention of publishing school level results. This time, however, school rankings were leaked to the press, causing great stir and ultimately leading to the cessation of testing activities. Discussions in the Knesset Education Committee reveal that teachers' organizations were the main force against publishing school rankings, threatening serious action if results were published. The Minister of Education and his Director-General acquiesced to the teachers' threats. The head of the National Organization for Parents requested, to no avail, that the Committee discuss publication of test results. The Committee never did consider pub-

lishing test results nor has the Parents Organization done anything to promote it.

Most of Israel's seven education regions conduct performance-monitoring tests of their own. Ministry regulations prohibit the publication of regional test results. Interviews and questionnaire data indicate that the accountability value of these tests is not high. Only 14% of inspector respondents noted that regional test results had led to any type of sanction against poor performers. Less than 60% of poor performers received resources to improve their performance.

The failure of performance testing to become a serious accountability mechanism in Israel suggests that teacher power has prevailed over the wishes of parents and the general public. Survey data shows that 70% of the population support or strongly support the publication of educational achievement test results (Tsidkiyahu, 1993). Yet the parents' organization has done little to push for this, explaining that there are more pressing things on its agenda. Education professionals interviewed suggest that Israeli society is not yet ripe for the publication of school level data. They use the hysteria caused by leaking of school rankings in 1991 to show the panic behaviour of parents and other groups. Inspectors and senior Ministry of Education officials, many of whom come from the ranks of teaching professionals go along with teachers, adding 'learning for the test' rationale. While 73% of inspectors favor the conduct of external testing, less than 10% want test results published.

In terms of the policy selection model, systematic external testing, whose results are published, counters the interests of members of the education policy subsystem (teachers and Ministry of education officials). Stakeholder groups in Israel have not been stirred sufficiently out of their apathy so as to push for policy changes. In other countries, stakeholders were aroused by a perceived education crisis and policymakers responded with education outcome performance monitoring systems – suggesting that school accountability is not always an elusive policy solution.

### *Political Accountability*

Definitions of political accountability include a broad range of activity through which constituents and stakeholders participate in determining policies and overseeing their implementation (Romzek & Dubnick, 1994; Thomas, 1998). Classic political accountability involves holding elected politicians accountable through the election process. In education, forums for downward political accountability to local communities have existed since the advent of state provided education in various

forms of school, local and district boards with representation from elected and appointed parents, community and business leaders. These have been strengthened in recent British reform efforts. The most radical form of political accountability is the establishment of quasi-markets enabling the exercise of school choice and exit. The policy image of school performance led to attempts to strengthen political accountability by offering opportunities for both voice and exit. Voice in the form of governing bodies in the U.K. and, to a degree, in the form of school based management in the U.S. and exit in the form of magnet schools, open enrollment and vouchers.

Schools, it would seem, offer an excellent opportunity for the exercise of what has been called 'downward accountability' to local communities (Day and Klein, 1987; Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Taylor, 1996). Local communities of parents, business-people and concerned citizens have a stake in overseeing the performance of schools in educating their children, their future employees and their neighbors. Recent policy attention to such forums occurred in the 1993 ERA in Britain which granted considerable power to school governing boards in the areas of financial and personnel management. In the United States, district and local school boards have long held these responsibilities. Over the past decade, school-based management policy initiatives have, to a varying extent, devolved these responsibilities to professional school staff and to individual school councils that sometimes include parent and community representatives.

Evidence from both the United States and Britain suggests that some district and school level governing bodies fulfill important accountability roles. Ouston, Fidler & Earley (1998), for example find that school governing bodies in England and Wales, "play a pivotal role in the governance and accountability of schools. . . . Schools are accountable to their governors, and the governors are accountable to the parents and the LEA." Similarly in the United States, ". . . of all the relevant authorities, local boards are generally regarded as the ones most responsible for school governance. Boards also wield real power, including the authority to hire and fire superintendents and to negotiate with teachers' unions" (Chubb & Moe, 1990). First (1992) used analysis of board minutes from twelve districts in Illinois over a three year period to demonstrate that, contrary to common belief, school boards spend a great deal of time and effort in dealing with substantive issues on the local education agenda. Moreover, studies show that the public values the role played by school boards as an intermediary between them and professional educators.

There is some contrary evidence suggesting that the political accountability opportunities offered by school boards were created larg-



ely for their symbolic value. Tucker and Ziegler (1978) for example, refer to citizen district school boards in the United States as engendering a ‘myth of lay control’. Jennings (1981) depicts the failure of American school councils in representing various constituent groups. Williams (1997) suggests that provisions in 1988 legislation in Britain for the involvement of parents and local communities in school governing bodies, “is largely illusory”. Several observers note that headteachers dominate governing bodies in English schools (Williams, 1997; Ouston, Fidler & Earley, 1998; Radnor, Ball & Vincent, 1998). Parent and community representatives are perceived as not being accountable to their constituents, lacking ‘real’ responsibilities and lacking the skills necessary to carry out their functions.

Williams (1997) suggests that there was never any real intention of making school governing bodies effective accountability mechanisms. Rather, in keeping with the political theory of policy selection, they were meant to serve as a smoke screen to mask the actual centralization and tightening of bureaucratic control of the 1988 school reforms. It was particularly important to the Conservative government of the day to make it appear like authority was being transferred to the people.

These examples suggest that there is variance across place and over time in the effectiveness of downward political accountability mechanisms. To date, no studies have investigated the variables that influence their success or failure. In keeping with Hess’ expectations, policymakers may be aware of the symbolic value of creating an aura of parent and community involvement in holding schools to account and so are not likely surprised or much upset by evidence as to the effectiveness of this policy alternative.

Unlike the United States and Britain, Israel has not even the facade of political accountability for school performance. There are no municipal or district level public forums for education policymaking or monitoring. On the level of downward accountability, there is no policy or general legislation of school boards. Parent associations exist at the school, municipal and national levels, but these have no official status. They operate as pressure groups which sometimes do have localized impacts on getting principals and teachers transferred. However, a review of the activities of the National Parents’ Organization between the years 1992 and 1999 shows that monitoring school performance does not even appear on the agenda.

One attempt to instituting downward accountability reflects the low place of external school accountability on Israel’s public agenda. In 1993, the Committee for Self-managed Schools recommended the establishment of school boards of governors with teacher, local author-

ity and community representatives. The school principal would serve as chairman and together with teacher representatives would constitute a majority of the board (Report of the Committee for Self-Managed Schools, 1993).

Even this rather non-threatening form of downward accountability was seen as a threat to the professional standing of school principals. In the words of the proposal initiator, “the idea of the board of governors was scrapped because principals saw it as endangering their independence”. It is interesting to note that parent and community representatives did not even attempt to push for the proposal – which originated from within the Ministry of Education.

Perhaps the ultimate mechanism for holding schools politically accountable for their performance is to expose them to market forces of competition and exit – i.e. allowing parents and pupils to choose schools. A recent comparative review notes that England, Wales, Sweden and New Zealand have enacted ‘radical’ school choice reforms and that school choice policy is at the forefront of political debate in several other countries (Vanderberghe, 1999). An American observer refers to an explosion, over the past two decades, in American school choice policies ranging from magnet schools to interdistrict choice to open enrollment (Witte, 1996). A 1997 study found that ‘hardly a state in the United States does not have some type of choice plan, and hardly a major urban area does not have a limited choice plan’. The extent of choice varies widely in these plans, but is generally restricted geographically, socio-economically or religiously (Cookson & Schroff, 1997).

There is a fair bit of evidence showing that school choice policies have been reasonably well implemented in countries such as England. The fact that some British schools have become over-enrolled and others under-enrolled shows that parents do take advantage of choice opportunities (Williams, 1997). One study of choice at the secondary school level in England demonstrates significant impacts that include ‘openness to parents’ and ‘sharpening up’ of strategies to improve academic achievement (Woods et al, 1998). School choice policy stirred a fair bit of opposition based on fears that it would hurt weaker population groups. And some observers claim that in the implementation of school choice, “only a minority of parents have in practice been able to encash such rights and that where they have, this has had negative knock-on effects for those less able or willing to pursue their claims” (Feintuck, 1994).

Vanderberghe (1999) reviews evidence suggesting that implementation of school choice policies in other countries has encountered more opposition. Henig’s (1994) portrayal of the development of school

choice policies in the United States demonstrates effects of politics of accountability considerations on opposition to school choice. He notes that severe opposition to school choice (voucher) policy in the United States came from organizations representing schoolteachers, school administrators and local education officials. Amongst the causes of this opposition were ‘administrative feasibility’ and ‘undermining public schools’. The former includes perceived threats to the hegemony of local/district officials in educational planning and images of pandemonium in trying to deal with over-enrolment and under-enrolment problems along with the need to expand some school sites while closing others. Teachers and administrators in the public school system feared that voucher policies would bring about massive transfer of students out of the public school system, posing a direct threat to their livelihoods. Local communities:

tended to favor the maintenance of neighborhood schools over strategies that allow a broad freedom to transfer. Some groups potentially did have a direct interest in resisting magnet plans. These included: 1. local school bureaucracies, with an incentive to protect their professional sphere of influence and familiar and comfortable ways of going about their business.

As in many other countries, school choice has been an issue on Israel’s public agenda, but a national policy has not been adopted. Survey data reveal that 71% of the general public supports opening up school registration areas (Tsidkiyahu, 1993). Yet stakeholder groups, such as the National Parents’ Organization, have not pushed for it. The head of the Organization put his signature on a Ministry of Education appointed Commission report whose recommendations, in practice, ruined any chance for the adoption of meaningful school choice policy (Report of the Commission on School Choice, 1994). The crux of these recommendations was an insistence that schools achieve academic equivalency as a precondition for school choice. Clearly, this would have eliminated the very competition that lies behind the accountability rationale for school choice. The Ministry never adopted the Commission’s recommendations and officially there is no school choice policy at the elementary and junior-high school levels.

Unofficially, there are quite a few avenues by which parents are able to choose schools. One observer claims that these actually amount to quite a bit of choice (Chen, 1997). Well-off parents can vote with their feet – locating in neighborhoods served by schools known to be good. The term ‘fictitious address’ is widely used to describe parents who, for the purpose of enrolling their children in ‘good’ schools, lie about their place of residence. An ever-growing network of magnet schools provide ample opportunity for parents to escape from neighborhood schools

that don't satisfy their expectations. But, these neighborhood schools are not really held to account as a result – they continue to provide poor education to the weakest population which remains with them (Report of the Public Commission for Examination of the Status of Super-regional Educational Frameworks, 1991).

This analysis of school choice policy shows once again that in Israel, stakeholders have not been stirred out of their apathy to bring about a policy change which goes against the interests of the dominant players in the education policy subsystem. One explanation for the lack of public pressure for market accountability is that the 'strong' parents are able to find reasonably well performing schools through unofficial choice avenues.

### *Conclusion*

Comparison between Israel and countries that have adopted school performance accountability policies lends support to Baumgartner & Jones' disequilibrium theory of policy changes. The policy image of school performance accountability in Britain, the United States and other countries met both of its conditions for policy change. School achievement was considered a problem and external accountability measures were considered effective solutions with broad public support. In Israel, school performance accountability has yet to emerge as a symbolically potent policy solution despite survey data and interview responses that demonstrate high levels of dissatisfaction with school performance.

Yehezkel Dror (1988) claims that agenda overload causes accountability to be a non-issue in Israel. "Overload of the public agenda in Israel with critical policy issues, (ie defence and foreign affairs) combined with the low estimation of the role of public administration in policy-making, reduces interest in "accountability" of the civil service." Critical policy issues may so dominate that parents, community representatives and politicians are unable to focus on lesser issues, such as school accountability. Findings by Schwartz (1998, 2000) concerning the small amount of attention paid by parliamentarians, ministers and senior level officials to evaluation and oversight in the areas of social welfare and health lend some empirical support to Dror's claim.

Sharkansky (1985) discusses a cultural characteristic of Israeli administration that may be related to agenda overload, reflected in a number of cases where Israeli administrators failed to follow-up on the implementation of programs. Sharkansky attributes the lack of follow-up to simple indifference. Former Prime-Minister Yitzhak Rabin made it one of his missions to fight against what he called the "trust me" or "it will be all right" culture.

Governance by coalition combined with a relatively high degree of politicization creates an environment not conducive to accountability policies. Knill (1999) notes, regarding Germany's slowness in adopting managerial reform that the need for 'compromise' and 'bargaining' in building coalitions and the relative autonomy granted to Ministers makes sweeping reforms difficult. The chances for enacting accountability policies in Israel's coalition government are even further reduced given its highly politicized administration. As Sharkansky (1993) puts it, "Where politicians control so much of who gets what and how, the appeal of efficient or responsive government may be less attractive." (See also State Comptroller's Office, 1989, 1991).

Parliamentary systems in which the legislature is dominated by ruling parties and party discipline is widely enforced are less likely to impose external accountability measures on public organizations than are systems where the legislature can be controlled by other than the President's party and where party discipline doesn't generally apply (Drewry, 1986). Thus legislative oversight in parliamentary democracies, such as Britain or Israel, is weaker than in presidential systems such as the United States (Schwartz, 2000).

The existence of comprehensive managerial reform in a country either creates or reflects an environment accepting the ideas of performance accountability, responsiveness to clients and quasi-markets. Britain, the United States and many other countries that adopted external school accountability have undertaken major managerialist reforms of their administration. While Israel has pockets of managerialist change, recommendations for comprehensive managerial reform have not been implemented (Galnoor, Rosenbloom & Yaroni, 1998).

Preliminary evidence suggests that countries that have adopted external school accountability policies face implementation obstacles. But to date, no studies have addressed the variance in the successful implementation of publishing school performance monitoring, downward political accountability mechanisms and school choice. Such research would cast further light on the environmental variables affecting the policies of accountability and on the question of when accountability is and is not an elusive policy solution.

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