



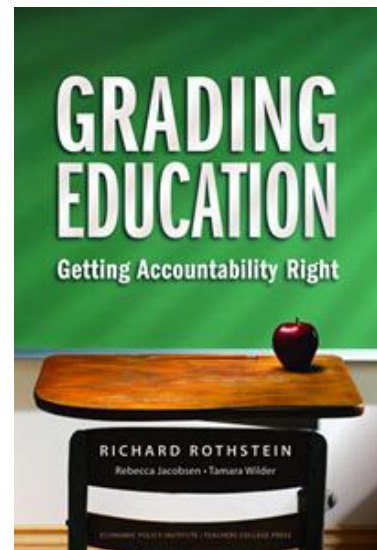
Rothstein, Richard; Jacobsen, Rebecca & Wilder, Tamara. (2008). *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

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In their recent book, *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right*, writers Richard Rothstein, Rebecca Jacobsen, and Tamara Wilder maintain that our country's state and federal test-based assessment programs such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), have failed in their mission to increase student achievement, have failed in their attempts to correctly assess the purpose and effectiveness of those institutions responsible for teaching and guiding our nation's children, and have therefore failed in their responsibility of creating well-rounded citizens. The authors claim that policies like NCLB have focused "exclusively on math and reading test scores, have narrowed the curriculum, misidentified both failing and successful, and established irresponsible expectations for what schools can accomplish" (back cover). Additionally, Rothstein, et al. argue that current test-based accountability policies ignore the basic tenets of what American citizens currently and



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historically believe constitutes well-educated, well-rounded students.

Rothstein, et al. warn that there are serious consequences for our nation's children from focusing only on math and reading at the expense of developing other long-term goals (i.e., critical thinking, civics, history), all of which used to help our nation's children become part of the democratic processes throughout their lifetimes. From telephone surveys given to a sample of nearly 1300 state legislators, school board members, superintendents, and adults over the age of 18, the authors compiled eight broad, long-term educational goals that those in the survey found to be most important. Those goals are: basic academic knowledge and skills, critical thinking and problem solving, appreciation of the arts and literature, preparation for skilled employment, social skills and work ethic, citizenship and community responsibility, physical health, and emotional health (p. 14). The book's authors lay out a careful historically-based argument that over the past 250 years of public education, our nation's leaders and forward-thinking citizens have valued these goals, in one form or another, for our public school students. Yet since the introduction authorization of NCLB, the state and federal governments have ignored the breadth of these eight long-term principles and now test nearly exclusively math and reading. The authors make a compelling argument that in focusing myopically on math and science, we create only short-term goals at the expense of the other long-term educational goals. They give the following reason for this phenomenon: "An accountability policy that bases rewards or punishments for schools and teachers [exclusively] on their students' math and reading scores creates incentives for teachers to devote more time and attention to math and reading and less to other curricular areas for which there are no consequences for poor performance" (p. 13). The authors argue that the reason the federal government has chosen to focus exclusively on these two areas of school effectiveness is because testing basic skills is less expensive than testing all of the eight principles. However, this overly-limited and purposeful accountability has "an unintended consequence; these accountability systems have interfered with, even destroyed, schools' efforts to achieve the other goals" (p. 42).

About the Authors

Richard Rothstein is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute. From 1999 to 2002 he was the national education columnist of *The New York Times*.



Rebecca Jacobsen is an assistant professor at Michigan State University. Her background is in politics and education where she has focused on public opinion and its impact on education policy.

Tamara Wilder is a 2007-08 Spencer Foundation Dissertation Fellow. Her research focuses on equity issues, accountability, school choice, and parent and community involvement in schools. She received her Ph.D. in Politics and Education from Columbia University.

Rothstein et al. bring up a dark secret of the current accountability system of which many of our nation's teachers and administrators are aware: NCLB's quotas—called Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)—encourage survival-based manipulation within many schools. Rothstein et al. write, "We should not have been surprised that test-based accountability plans have corrupted education" (p. 9). The authors reveal other corrupt and predictable problems of such narrow accountability, what the authors refer to as "perverse accountability" (p.53). That is, many schools have found themselves trying to survive the punitive, narrowly-defined accountability parameters through the following phenomena: goal distortion (focusing on reading and math at the expense of other broader, more long-term goals), gaming (tricking the accountability system by focusing more of the instruction on the so called bubble students, teachers and/or administrators erasing wrong answers and entering correct answers, decisions of whom to suspend and not suspend during test days, and recategorizing high performing students as special education students and vice-versa, to name a few). Borrowing from examples of perverse accountability driven by quota-based assessment in the fields of health care, welfare, manufacturing, public transit, and police departments, Rothstein et al. employ Donald T. Campbell's "Law of Performance Measurement" (p. 77). Campbell asserts that "the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social process it is intended to monitor (p. 77). In other words, when the educational stakes are highest (i.e., closing low-performing schools, labeling schools as successes and failures, and paying teachers based on their students' test scores), the setting is ripe for corrupt and perverse accountability.

Rothstein, et al. do not advocate reduced accountability. Rather, they promote increased accountability by holding schools and student-centered institutions such as "children's health care services, early childhood and preschool programs, parental support and education programs, after-school and summer programs, and community development agencies" (p. 154) accountable across the eight long-range educational goals. Rothstein, et al. call for every school and youth institution to have increased, consequential accountability through mandatory, on-the-spot inspections conducted every three years by

accredited teams of paid, professional evaluators. The authors advocate that these inspectors and evaluators make timely and clear recommendations to each school and institution based on the inspectors' evaluation not only of standardized test scores, but of student work as well. Noting the new method of accountability will not come cheaply, Rothstein, et.al. estimate the cost of these regular and thorough investigations at approximately \$500 million each year. The authors also suggest that all 17-year-olds also receive an "out-of-school household survey conducted once every three years" (p. 157) to determine how effective schools and institutions have been at teaching the eight broad principles. The authors estimate this cost at an additional \$20 million annually.

Through sound, logical, and cogent arguments, Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder create a biting criticism of the limits and harms found in the current test-based accountability system for public schools. During my studies as a doctoral student in an educational leadership program, I specifically have appreciated Rothstein as an advocate for public education and as a policy analyst who has debunked the historical and contemporary criticisms of our nation's public schools. As a university instructor, I have used Rothstein's previous book, *The Way We Were?*, to help masters-level students understand the creation of the political machine that historically has worked to denigrate, if not destroy, public education. So I was not disappointed when *Grading Education*, took a similar historical approach. Rather I was intrigued by their critique of NCLB and test-based accountability: being well educated means more than being proficient in just math and reading. The authors craft a compelling argument of why the book's eight broad educational goals are timeless and necessary, and the logic flows beautifully into the book's assertion that NCLB has ignored those important goals. In *Grading Education*, the authors devote enough space in each chapter to bring their arguments to maturation through historical and common sense lines of analysis. In typical Rothsteinian fashion, the authors take a moment at the end of the book to argue for public education in the section titled Schools as Scapegoats, which should please those who follow classic Rothstein and appreciate his ability to cut through the public school blame game.

Thankfully, the authors were not content simply with criticizing NCLB. The book gives a reasonably detailed, albeit cumbersome, account of how they would change assessments of

schools and youth-based institutions to reflect a system that evaluates students' successes based on all eight principles. While the authors' suggestions bring a balanced approach to their criticism of current policies, their solutions seem ungainly and expensive. The authors' assessment plan, based on surprise visitations of all schools and youth institutions as well as personal examinations of student work in each location seem overwhelmingly complex and impossibly subjective.

Rothstein's work has always been easy to read and understand; his skill in laying out logical support for his arguments is one of the main reasons I continue to reach for Rothstein's work. The material contained in this book is compelling because it offers educators and others interested in public education another way of looking at the assessment of our nation's schools. As a high school mathematics teacher who has worked only in low-performing urban schools, I have seen firsthand the effects of the current, punitive accountability system. Based in large part on the school's standardized math and reading scores, the first high school where I taught was closed. This shuttering happened even though we were making progress; however, our progress in the areas of mathematics and reading was not enough. During our school's professional development, we focused on ways to increase students' reading and math scores, and our students who scored unsatisfactorily on the previous year's test are assigned to additional reading and math classes—generally skills-based curricula. Unfortunately, those students were scheduled into skills classes at the expense of their elective classes, a sad phenomenon that Rothstein, et al. believe happens all too often in our nation's low-income, high-minority schools

Rothstein's, et al.'s book is a timely and important piece of educational literature because it reminds us to look at what type of education we hold dear. Do we value an education system that distorts what our nation's children are learning at the expense of those subjects beyond math and reading? Or, do we value a balanced learning environment for all students, regardless of their ability, their income, or their race? The book's thesis allows us as teachers, administrators, school board members, citizens, and nation to reflect upon the previously unquestioned, and certainly unexamined, punitive system of testing and grading our nation's schools. This book is for all who are involved in and care about public education. But more importantly, this book is for all citizens of the United States who

believe that the purpose of education is to create a stronger republic. I challenge anyone who reads this book to continue to hold a strong, positive opinion of our nation's current punitive and narrowly-based system of school accountability.

Reference

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About the Reviewer

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Karmen Kirtley is a doctoral student at the University of Colorado Denver. Her areas of academic interest include teacher burnout/teacher retention in low-performing schools and the educational and economic policies that affect low-performing schools and the students and teachers within. She is also a high school mathematics and statistics teacher with Denver Public Schools, and teaches a master's level class at the University of Colorado Denver titled Curriculum Development and School Reform.

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