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McDermott, Kathryn A. (2011) *High-Stakes Reform: The Politics of Educational Accountability*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

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What did Dr. Seuss have to say about education accountability? Apparently a lot. In her thorough and highly readable book about the formation of state accountability policies entitled *High Stakes Reform: The Politics of Educational Accountability*, Kathryn McDermott employs the following quote from Dr. Seuss concerning the people of Hawtch Hawtch:

Out West near Hawtch Hawtch, there's a
Hawtch-Hawtcher Bee-Watcher. His job is to
watch—is to keep both his eyes on the lazy town
bee. A bee that is watched will work harder, you
see.... Well, the Bee-Watcher Watcher watched
the Bee-Watcher. He didn't watch well. So
another Hawtch-Hawtcher had to come in as a
Watch-Watcher Watcher. And today all the

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Hawtchers who live in Hawtch-Hawtch are watching on Watch-Watcher-Watching-Watch, Watch-Watching the Watcher who's watching the bee. You're not a Hawtch-Hawtcher. You're lucky, you see. (Geisel 1973, pp. 26-27.)

Embedded in this delightful wordplay is a parable: we may want people—teachers, let's say—to perform to a higher standard, but who is best positioned to make sure that standard is attained, and what do we do if the person monitoring its attainment falls down on the job? *High Stakes Reform*, then, is not about what happens to schools in the wake of accountability reform so much as how byzantine oversight structures grow from the political systems that envision them. In short, it is a book about how seemingly rational goals for the education system can lead to irrational policies—how governments become the Watch-Watcher Watchers of public schooling.

According to McDermott, theories of performance accountability are founded on the potential for improvement: “the targeted agency or system is not already performing as well as it might in the targeted area and is capable of doing better” (p. 18). Further, this underperformance is not due to lack of ability, but of will or focus. Accountability, the theory goes, can help with both. When underperformance is due to will, the threat of sanctions creates pressure to improve whether or not the individuals involved care to. Likewise, accountability can help with matters of focus. A person or agency might not be aware that a performance problem exists, in which case measurement of performance outcomes will bring the problem to light. Both rationales have been used to explain why accountability can and will improve education. Either teachers are unaware they could do more for their children or, even worse, they are aware but simply choose not to care. While the latter accusation seems particularly mercenary, recent legislative debates, including those in Wisconsin about retracting collective bargaining rights, suggest that some in power suspect educators of willful complacency.

McDermott examines these justifications in action by studying the creation of education accountability systems in three states: Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Connecticut. All three accountability policies were

adopted prior to federal passage of *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and resulted in varying degrees of oversight and intervention. As a result, looking at the states in conjunction provides insight into how accountability systems are implemented by states in the relative absence of outside pressure and how internecine political dynamics shape those policies. For example, whereas Massachusetts implemented stiff sanctions for underperforming schools—including state takeovers of chronically failing schools—at the behest of the business community, Connecticut opted to collect performance data and make it public, but avoid many of the most severe sanctions. The predominant belief in Connecticut, championed by the state’s department of education, was that heightened awareness of underperformance would be sufficient to change educational practices. Even in this brief glimpse of two states, we see both rationales for accountability at work: either policies are meant to counteract negligence with pressure, or make underperformers aware of their underperformance. As McDermott’s case studies show, however, states oftentimes arrive at these differing accountability strategies by accident rather than purposively; reformers know they want “accountability,” but care less about which of the two problems, exactly, it is meant to address.

Ultimately, the strength of *High Stakes Reform* is, ironically, its willingness to leave schools out of the picture. Copious research has been devoted to understanding whether accountability changes schools in rational ways, but relatively little to understanding whether the political actors that built the accountability system acted rationally. After all, understanding what accountability requirements include and incentivize is not the same as understanding how they came to be, the goal of McDermott’s enterprise. In New Jersey, for example, the driving force behind accountability reform was money. After five different educational equity lawsuits (cleverly titled *Abbot I-V*) resulted in additional funds being doled out to low-performing (read poor) schools, politicians and much of the citizenry wanted to know its money would be spent well. Whenever money changes hands, McDermott notes, and especially from the rich to the poor, there is typically a commensurate desire to make sure the transfer of wealth is worth it, whatever that means. In short, accountability didn’t materialize in New Jersey due to

belief in a precipitous education crisis (though one may have been mentioned) so much as from a reaction to the redistribution of wealth.

If there is any flaw in McDermott's tale of the Watch-Watchers, it is her overreliance on the official record. Many of her arguments about the various states are based on transcripts from hearings, newspaper articles, and the like. Yet, in the realm of politics, the most interesting (and oftentimes most genuine) arguments about a policy occur off the record. If the book's intent really is to look under the hood of accountability policy formulation, then it does itself a disservice by assuming what is said in print is the same as what people believe. I may oversimplify, but not overly; the academic tone of the book ensures that few political knife fights see the light of day. At times, a more journalistic approach using anonymous interviews and backstory might have helped the narrative move into less sanitized discourse.

Then again, perhaps McDermott's task is not to reveal, but to chronicle—in which case she does a first-rate job. For an account of how different political actors decide that teachers are either (a) lazy or (b) unaware and how those actors then formulate policies to rouse teachers from their collective stupor, one would do well to read McDermott's book. Many of us are neither policymakers nor teachers and can therefore read *High Stakes Accountability* from the comfort of an armchair and shake our heads. We're lucky, you see.

About the Reviewer

Jim Soland is a doctoral student and IES Fellow at Stanford's Center for Education Policy Analysis (CEPA). Prior to joining CEPA, he served as a Senior Fiscal and Policy Analyst at the Legislative Analyst's Office in Sacramento, where he evaluated state and federal projects related to K-12 assessment, standards, and district improvement. In addition to his policy work, Mr. Soland taught at KIPP San Francisco Bay Academy and the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth. He received his bachelor's degree from Haverford College and master's degree in education from Stanford. His doctoral work focuses on quantitative program evaluation, assessment, and district data use.

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