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Set Public Education Free: Abolish the Accountability System

By A. Patrick Huff, Ph.D.

For over three decades, our nation's public education system has been shackled by an illusion—an illusion that we can measure school success through standardized testing, punish poor performance into excellence, and reduce the essence of learning to a spreadsheet. In Texas and across the country, the *Accountability System* has become a weapon, not a tool. If we are serious about saving public education, we must dismantle it entirely.

The current system, launched with the 1990s-era Texas model and supercharged by the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, promised a future of higher achievement, especially for low-income and minority students. That future never came. Instead, we've watched the opposite unfold: a collapse of trust, a narrowing of curriculum, and a generation of students and educators demoralized by test-based labeling.

The Evidence of Failure

Despite decades of high-stakes testing, national assessments like the NAEP show stagnant or declining performance in reading and math. The very goals used to justify the Accountability System—closing the achievement gap, raising literacy, improving math competence—have not materialized. What has increased is test prep, student anxiety, teacher burnout, and an education culture obsessed with metrics over meaning.

The system hasn't just failed—it has harmed.

A System Built on Punishment, Not Progress

The most insidious aspect of the Accountability System is its pretense of equity. In reality, it punishes poverty. School ratings correlate almost perfectly with socioeconomic status. Low-income schools receive the lowest scores and bear the harshest consequences: funding cuts, staff turnover, charter takeovers, and public shaming.

It is not accountability; it is academic profiling—that is students become numbers. Teachers become data managers. Principals become compliance officers. And parents—especially in marginalized communities—are told their schools are failures without ever being given the resources or respect needed to change that narrative.

The Human Cost

Talk to any veteran teacher in Texas. You'll hear about rising resignations, mental health strain, and the loss of joy in teaching. This system drives good educators away and deters new ones from entering the profession. It does not honor the complexity of teaching, the uniqueness of every learner, or the wisdom of local communities.

Worse still, it rewrites the purpose of education. Instead of fostering critical thinking, civic understanding, and a love of learning, schools are turned into test factories. Students are not inspired to become leaders—they are trained to become compliant test-takers.

A Path Forward: Local Control, Real Learning

It doesn't have to be this way. We can imagine—and implement—a better system:

- Use **norm-referenced assessments** like the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to identify student needs, not punish them.
- Return curriculum authority and evaluation to **local school districts and communities**, where decisions can reflect the values, challenges, and cultures of those they serve.
- Measure school success through **holistic indicators**—graduation rates, student engagement, parent feedback, and community involvement.
- Fund struggling schools **equitably and proactively**, not through punitive interventions but with the wraparound services they need to thrive.

The abolishment of the Accountability System governing public education, will not come from within the political system. The entrenched interests that maintain its grip on schools—from testing companies to policy makers—have neither the will nor the incentive to dismantle the very system that serves their purposes. Like many forms of institutionalized injustice throughout American history, the Accountability System is unlikely to be undone by legislative goodwill or reformist rhetoric.

Instead, true change is more likely to come through the courts. Just as the Supreme Court struck down legalized segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), declaring “separate but equal” to be inherently unequal, the legal system must now confront the moral and educational bankruptcy of the current accountability regime. In both cases, the state enforced unjust laws that deprived children of their right to a meaningful education—once by racial separation, now by data-driven dehumanization.

Today's Accountability System—built on high-stakes standardized testing, punitive consequences for schools, and reductive metrics (referring to overly simplistic ways of measuring complex realities – especially when it comes to student learning, teacher performance, or school quality), does not serve children. It sorts, labels, and marginalizes, often

disproportionately harming students from marginalized communities. It narrows curriculum, encourages teaching to the test, and crushes the joy of learning.

To set public education free, the Accountability System must be ruled unconstitutional. Like segregation, it must be seen not as a failed policy, but as a violation of fundamental rights—rights to equity, dignity, and a future not determined by a single test score.

If the goal is liberation for all children, especially the most vulnerable, then the courts must once again become the arena in which justice is demanded and delivered. To move an injustice into the justice system, the plaintiff must have standing. In other words, the plaintiff must demonstrate they are the victim of great harm. There is no other entity that demonstrates this harm of government than the children themselves. The system that best represents the children, other than parents, are the thousands of school districts whose responsibility it is to provide the very best education for the children they represent. Superintendents and school boards have organized before to fight the system, in this case the Commissioner of Education in Texas, Mike Morath. Once again, school district trustees and superintendents must find the will power to fight the juggernaut that is the Texas Education Agency, who implement the unjust laws passed by the Texas Legislature. It is the local Independent School Districts that have the necessary standing to file in the courts of justice and the court of public opinion, that knows all too well, what is passed off as public education today, bears little resemblance to true classical education, which was once taught in our public schools.

The time for tinkering is over. The Accountability System must be abolished.

Public education should be a cornerstone of democracy, not a casualty of bureaucratic overreach. If we are to restore trust, elevate achievement, and honor the educators who devote their lives to our children, we must break free from the failed legacy of high-stakes accountability.

Let's liberate our schools. Let's trust our teachers. Let's give our children back their right to a meaningful, human education.



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B. S., T.C.U. / M. Ed., Sam Houston State University / Ph.D. Prairie View A&M University. Patrick Huff served in the public schools in Texas from 1973-2007. He retired after 34 years in the profession as a teacher, assistant principal and principal at the middle school and high school level. During those years he became acutely aware of the immense amount of time devoted to standardized testing. By the time of his retirement virtually all academic decisions were built around strategies devoted to testing. Taking place also at this time was the beginning of the phenomenon of failing schools. Schools were beginning to fail due to the outcomes of their students on the standardized test. Due to working in the system, Dr. Huff recognized what was taking schools to failure; it was the accountability system and the way it was written to control teachers, principals, and entire school districts.

Upon retirement Dr. Huff went back to school to receive his Ph.D., writing his dissertation on the subjugation of public schools to the federal government. His dissertation was then converted into a book that deals with the unrealistic No Child Left Behind mandates, the federalization of the entire public school system across America, and the phenomenon of school failure and why it is occurring. The title of his book is *The Takeover of Public Education in America: The Agenda to Control Information and Knowledge Through the Accountability System*. Dr. Huff's book deals with the mechanism used to drive schools toward failure and provides excellent testimony from those who have seen the endgame of No Child Left Behind, school takeover by the state.

Dr. Huff continued to teach in the graduate school of education at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, until his full retirement in 2022.

Dr. Huff has spoken before community groups, church groups, school boards, and before the Texas Senate and House Education Committees. He is available to speak at most anytime during the year and can be reached at aphuff51@gmail.com.

He currently lives in Tomball, Texas with Connie, his wife of 42 years.

