

# Introduction

BETTY LOU WHITFORD AND KEN JONES

This book is a collection of essays, cases, and proposals focused on the effects of making high-stakes accountability the centerpiece of state-mandated education reform. In 1989, when the Kentucky Supreme Court struck down over 700 laws governing elementary and secondary education, many in the state gasped and wondered what additional surprises were in store. Would the legislature replace the existing system with more of the same? Would it be better or worse than what we had? Would poor districts gain sorely needed resources? Would wealthy districts lose? What would be the effects on school governance? On teaching and learning?

In 1990, the legislature passed a massive reform package known as KERA—the Kentucky Education Reform Act—and many in Kentucky were gleeful as a result. Reform-minded educators viewed the innovations included as progressive, even cutting edge:

- A long-needed appointed (rather than elected) chief state school officer and antinepotism measures;
- An ungraded primary program;
- A new financing formula;
- Family resource and youth service centers;
- School-based decision making councils;
- Performance assessments including group problem-solving tasks and an emphasis on writing;
- School accountability for student learning rather than for how schools and teachers were to go about the context-laden tasks of improving teaching and learning.

These changes were dramatic, putting Kentucky in the forefront of state reform. Many were proud and excited to be involved in such reforms as the eyes

of the nation turned toward Kentucky, a state that typically has ranked near the bottom on most measures of educational quality and near the top on factors contributing to educational failures.

In the eight years since the passage of KERA, we have had opportunities to examine closely what has become the centerpiece of Kentucky's approach to reform, high-stakes school accountability, and some of the effects that can be observed in classrooms and schools. Divided into five parts, the book presents various perspectives on this approach to accountability by considering school and classroom cases, several alternative ways of approaching accountability, some of which are in use in other regions of the country, and essay reactions offered by others actively engaged in reform from different vantage points: two researchers, a former high school principal turned national consultant, and a private foundation grantmaker.

Part I introduces issues related to accountability, assessment, and teacher commitment in an essay by the editors, Betty Lou Whitford and Ken Jones. Here we present an argument for how Kentucky's linking of performance assessment with high stakes accountability has undermined the value of performance assessment as a strategy for improving teaching and learning. This linkage, we argue, has forced compliance with several state mandates but has not developed commitment to the vision of learner-centered, performance-oriented teaching and learning described in KERA.

The six chapters in part II are drawn from long-term case studies of teachers, classrooms, and schools. They move from the classroom level (chapters 2, 3, and 4), to a high school department (chapter 5), to a whole school view of change (chapter 6), and finally to a discussion of the reactions of teachers across four districts (chapter 7). Chapter 2, by Terry I. Brooks, describes two primary teachers who work as a team with the same group of different aged children for several years. At the time of his study, Brooks had just left a deputy superintendent position in a large, urban district where he had provided support for many cutting-edge reforms. His close look at the classroom of Jodie McKnight and Demi Kidd led him to question previously held perspectives on change, which he relates following a description of the classroom. In chapter 3, Christy McGee captures how another primary teacher, veteran Katherine Alexander Futrell, has constructed teaching and learning opportunities for a multi-age, multi-ability group of children beginning in 1991, just after KERA passed. The editors contribute chapter 4 about how 27-year veteran high school mathematics teacher Mary Jo Foster's quest for better learning experiences for her students led her to focus on professional development. In chapter 5, Letitia Hockstrasser Fickel captures the professional community developed by a high school social studies department and discusses the impact of high-stakes accountability on their practice. West Middle School, a low-income urban school with its fourth principal in six years, is the focus of chapter 6, written by Jan Calvert, Donna Gaus, and Gordon Ruscoe.

Calvert is now (fall, 1998) into her fourth year as principal of the school, while Gaus and Ruscoe have served as evaluators of various reform initiatives operating in the school during Calvert's tenure. This chapter is a story of how the school's efforts at reform clashed with the state's in the context of declining test scores and state intervention. Chapter 7 comes from a longitudinal study by a team of researchers from the Appalachian Education Laboratory who have been following KERA since 1990 in 26 schools comprising four mostly rural/small town districts. Patricia Kannapel, Pam Coe, Lola Aagaard, Beverly Moore, and Cynthia Reeves report on teachers' responses to the high-stakes accountability and some of the effects they have observed.

Part III, composed of three chapters, invites the reader to leave Kentucky for a time in order to consider three alternatives to Kentucky's high-stakes approach to accountability. Linda Shelor, in chapter 8, describes a teacher appraisal system that is focused on professional growth. Early evidence from its operation in districts in several states indicates that the model is effective at building commitment rather than just compliance to administrative mandates. In chapter 9, David Ruff, Debra Smith, and Lynne Miller of the Southern Maine Partnership describe how performance assessment can be used effectively for accountability in a state that values local rather than centralized control. Part III concludes with chapter 10, an essay from Anne Wheelock about how states might share power with local districts in a model of accountability that blends professional needs with state management responsibilities.

For part IV, we invited reactions to the first three parts of the book from a thoughtful group of individuals with different perspectives, all vitally engaged in education reform. In chapter 11, Jon Snyder discusses accountability by analyzing the book's cases and proposals. Currently director of teacher education at the University of California–Santa Barbara and senior researcher for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, Snyder has written extensively about education reform and accountability. The views of a private foundation grantmaker, A. Richardson Love Jr., constitute chapter 12. As education program director for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Love has closely observed KERA as a funder for a curriculum and staff development program used extensively in Kentucky primary classrooms since 1990 called *Different Ways of Knowing*. Marilyn Hohmann's reaction is presented in chapter 13. Currently a senior consultant with the Center for Leadership in School Reform, she served from 1986 to 1996 as the principal a low-wealth high school at the forefront of secondary school reform nationally. Dick Corbett is a veteran education researcher and author of numerous articles and books dealing with reform. The contributor of chapter 14, he is most concerned with looking inside schools and classrooms to determine the effects of reform on students.

The book concludes with another essay by the editors. In chapter 15, we recap some of the positive and negative effects we have observed to date with

Kentucky's reforms and, drawing on the cases, proposals, and reactions presented in the book, we propose an approach to accountability that we believe has promise for Kentucky and elsewhere.

Two additional introductory comments are in order. The first concerns confusion that has existed in Kentucky—and elsewhere—regarding significant distinctions between *KERA*—the comprehensive education reform legislation passed in 1990—and *KIRIS*—the assessment and accountability system devised in response to *KERA* that, in the words of state education leaders, was to “drive” reform of teaching in the state. A hallmark of *KERA* was a new vision of teaching and learning: they were to be performance-oriented. Curriculum was to be determined largely by school councils, those closest to the students, with advice from curriculum experts at the state level. Teachers and their students were to focus on how students might demonstrate what they could do with their knowledge—eventually defined broadly as a list of 57 “academic expectations.” They would do this through various performances that were to be incorporated into the daily teaching and learning in Kentucky classrooms. They were to focus on a full range of thinking—recall, application, and problem solving as well as evaluation, integration, and synthesis of knowledge. It would follow that student assessment in the classroom should be performance-based.

Consistent with this approach to teaching and learning, *KERA* mandated that student assessment for the state accountability test was to be primarily performance-based. In the early stages of *KIRIS*, there was an emphasis on performance assessment. Parts of the test that were less performance-oriented were labeled “transition” items—the transition would eventually be totally to a “portfolio environment.” The individual student assessments were aggregated to determine a school score, which in turn became part of an accountability index. The index was then used to determine how much gain the school was to make during the next cycle to gain cash rewards and avoid state sanctions.

This complex process is explained more fully both in chapter 1 and in chapter 7. The point here is that the emphasis placed on the accountability index and its rewards and sanctions for teachers and administrators led many in the state to equate *accountability* with *KIRIS assessment*. The emphasis in *KERA* on performance assessment easily became intermeshed with the emphasis in *KIRIS* on accountability and assessment that, over time, became less and less performance-oriented. This in turn led many in Kentucky to use interchangeably the terms *accountability* and *assessment* well as the terms *KIRIS* and *KERA*, blurring the distinctions that were clear in the early 1990s. This blurring of meanings is sometimes reflected in the cases presented here.

The second introductory comment that is significant to this book is that since these chapters were drafted, the state legislature has responded to the considerable dissatisfaction with *KIRIS* by passing a bill in the spring of 1998 mandating a new testing and accountability system. Although many decisions have yet to be

made, the direction of the coming changes has been set. KIRIS has been discontinued and will be replaced with the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS). While the high-stakes nature of KIRIS has been retained, there will be even less emphasis on performance assessment in CATS—fewer entries in the writing portfolio will be required, the math portfolio has been dropped, and a standardized multiple-choice test has been incorporated into the testing system. The reader is cautioned to keep in mind, however, that the research presented in this book deals with conditions as they existed during KIRIS and its various iterations between 1990 and 1998. The lessons from Kentucky about using performance assessment for high-stakes accountability remain and can provide guidance to policymakers in Kentucky and other states as they struggle with balancing the state's need for accountability with the context-laden decisions teachers and administrators must make to improve teaching and learning for all children. Readers interested in current information about the state's testing program are encouraged to visit the web site for the Kentucky Department of Education at <http://www.kde.state.ky.us>.