

Real Accountability in K–12 Education The Marriage of Ted and Alice

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“Accountability” could be the most-used word in contemporary American educational parlance, but it may also have the most nebulous and multifarious meaning. Indeed, the term now faintly recalls the late-sixties drama *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*, for it has four main characters and they couple, bicker, fight, and generally interact in almost every imaginable combination. Each has problems. Some combinations tend to fight, whereas others make beautiful music together, at least some of the time.

This paper introduces and appraises the four versions of accountability that are most important to education reform in today’s United States, together with some of the combinations, tensions, and confusions that arise among them. It examines how they work in the charter school context. It concludes by suggesting that the most promising accountability strategy for the future—albeit no sure thing—entails a judicious, charterlike combination of two versions. This can be thought of as the marriage of Ted and Alice but with a carefully drawn antenuptial agreement.

First, let us meet the quartet.

1. *Compliance*. “Trust the system” (Bob). Follow its rules and procedures. Generally work within—and seek to improve—that system. Put emphasis on whether everything is done according to the rulebook and whether resources are adequate and properly deployed. If there’s a problem, change or add a rule, a program, a procedure, or a person. Continually fiddle with the inputs. If kids aren’t learning enough, give them more teachers, more course requirements, more homework, or additional computers. This is classic bureaucratic accountability, hierarchical, top-down, and regulatory. It’s so familiar we don’t ordinarily even think of it as accountability. Although today it’s apt to include rhetoric about results, in fact what participants in the enterprise are chiefly accountable for is obeying instructions and managing inputs and processes.

2. *Professional norms and expertise*. “Trust the experts” (Carol). This is also a within-the-system form of accountability, but its dynamics are different. As in medicine, law, or the clergy, its main force comes from deference to what one’s professional peers and colleagues deem the truest or best way to do things. Though devotees of Carol-style professional accountability may also pay lip service to bureaucratic (Bob-style) compliance, to serving clients (Alice), and to meeting standards (Ted), the main focus is on, say, teaching math as recommended by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics or having one’s college of education accredited by the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or selecting superior teachers through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) or ensuring that one’s school faithfully embodies the “Multiple Intelligences” theory of learning. Such reference groups are privately organized, so they’re not officially in charge of one’s actions (though some, such as NCATE and NBPTS, wheedle their way into state policy and become

virtual arms of the bureaucratic system) and their sources of influence have mainly to do with the creeds, gurus, and belief structures of the educational profession. Indeed, it's not wrong to see Carol-style accountability as akin to joining a devout religious sect and holding oneself to the tenets of that sect. Like any true believers, people who feel primarily accountable to their professional peers are apt to pay only grudging attention to consumer preferences, to policies set by elected lay bodies, and to bureaucratic control systems. They'll do what they must in those accountability domains but only for pragmatic reasons. Their private conversation often dwells on how to surmount some hurdle that outsiders have placed in the path of true professionalism.

3. *Standards-based reform*. "Trust, but verify" (Ted). This is probably the most discussed form of accountability today, certainly in policy (and business) circles. It's what gets the spotlight at national "summits" and in legislative chambers. Think of it as a top-down, externally imposed strategy for inducing change in education by stipulating what children are supposed to learn in school, testing to see whether they've learned it, and imposing consequences on children (and sometimes adults) depending on how well it's been learned. The essential mechanisms are these: some higher level of political authority—most often a legislature or state board of education, nearly always an entity outside the educational profession proper—develops academic standards that a child, classroom, school, school system, or entire state is supposed to attain. That same higher authority also imposes tests or other measures by which to determine whether and how well its standards are being met. A fully wrought accountability system then dispenses rewards and sanctions (or interventions) meant to change behavior down the line and thereby to foster improved results. Until recently, most people thought of standards-based reform as driven chiefly by states, and, for the most part, that remains true. Today, however, in the aftermath of Bill Clinton's Goals 2000 program

and George W. Bush's "no child left behind" proposal, we're accustomed to Uncle Sam at least trying to push states, districts, and schools toward standards-based accountability.

4. *The marketplace*. "Trust the customers" (Alice). The fourth and final member of our accountability quartet grew up outside the traditional public school system in the company of schools that are directly answerable to their clients through market dynamics. Private schools, for example, must satisfy their customers, not only with respect to academics but in a hundred other ways as well, or they risk losing enrollment and revenue. Charter schools face a similar situation. Only if they can attract and keep students will they have income. What could more forcefully concentrate the mind?

Market-style accountability has spread beyond private and charter schools to include sundry forms of public school choice, "virtual" schooling, "magnet" schools, and vouchers—both the publicly and privately financed kinds. It remains, however, the most controversial of these four strategies, for it's the only one that employs a flexible definition of public education and that—in some versions—allows tax-generated monies to flow into schools not directly controlled by governmental bodies. Note, though, that it's not the only strategy that defers to private norms and values. As we have seen, professional (i.e., Carol-style) accountability is also characterized by deference to the views of nongovernmental groups and entities.

COMBOS

These four forms of accountability are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it's unusual to find a school where only one of them is operating. Here are the most common combinations:

Bob and Carol. This is the longest-established and most frequent coupling: bureaucratic compliance plus professional norms. It's the accountability package that operates—to the

extent that anything does—in most conventional U.S. public schools (and many other lands). A school’s principal, for example, leads a staff that was chosen (and compensated, and tenured) by the system’s central office, but it’s his job to whip them into a school team that honors the precepts of, say, the Coalition of Essential Schools or that teaches reading according to the dictates of the International Reading Association.

Bob and Ted. Over the past decade, this has also become a commonplace pairing: bureaucratic compliance plus standards-based reform. In this combination, the standards-based part, which is top-down in its own right, melds with old-fashioned management of inputs and practices. From the school’s standpoint, instead of simply complying with rules and procedures about resources and programs, the staff must now also fulfill externally imposed standards and produce externally mandated results. The combination tends to make for a docile staff, and maybe also a cynical one, as it doesn’t take huge imagination to see that Bob-style compliance rules governing inputs and services can easily get in the way of Ted-style demands for improved test scores. (Consider, for example, a special-education regulation that keeps a disruptive child in the classroom of a harried teacher who then has less time to ensure that the other twenty-three kids learn how to multiply and divide.)

Carol and Ted. This combo may make more sense on paper than in reality, but it’s far from unusual: professional norms *cum* standards-based accountability. Recall how the NCTM math standards have been folded into the standards-based reforms of many states. Picture an achievement-minded district prodding its schools to embrace designs developed under the auspices of New American Schools. A school that is striving to install, say, the “Roots and Wings” program is almost surely doing so in order to meet higher state or district

standards. Conversely, a district that reconstitutes a school because it has failed to attain standards will likely use a “professional” design as part of the involuntary makeover.

Carol and Alice. This couple, too, can be spotted together more often as new schools of choice (charters, especially, but also outsourced schools) model themselves on professional school designs and standards. A charter school application that recently crossed my desk, for example, pledged that the new school would follow Howard Gardner’s theory of “Multiple Intelligences.” In Colorado, many new charter schools employ the “Core Knowledge” curriculum developed by E. D. Hirsch. As for the management firm now called Edison Schools, not only does it have a professionally crafted school design of its own, but also within that design is another: the “Success for All” program for primary reading.

The remaining two of the six duos are rare. We will return to Ted and Alice (standards plus marketplace) because I believe that couple holds great promise for education accountability in the United States. As for Bob and Alice, theirs is an uncommon and fundamentally incompatible pairing: bureaucratic compliance cum marketplace dynamics. The only situation where one is apt to find it struggling to work is where the system mandates that school choices be provided—such as a centrally created set of magnet schools, perhaps for purposes of racial integration. But it seldom succeeds, for the essence of top-down management militates against the free play of market dynamics. It’s tough for a school’s principal to follow the superintendent’s dictates in core domains such as staffing, budget, and curriculum while also holding her school accountable for satisfying its clients.

The *ménage-a-trois* is infrequent but not unheard of, although, as is usual in such relationships, the situation may be unstable and the three participants may not be full equals. Bob, Carol, and Ted are the most apt to join together in a melding of bureaucratic compliance, professional norms,

and external standards. Indeed, many education reformers think this is a strong trio. It's where one finds a school system in hot pursuit of state standards mandating that certain professionally approved reforms be put in place, such as extra pay for NBPTS-certified teachers or compulsory participation in specific staff-development programs or installation of the Modern Red Schoolhouse design in a faltering Title I school.

Of the other three possible trios, the only one that doesn't include the hapless pairing of Bob (compliance) and Alice (markets) is the combination of Carol, Ted, and Alice: professional norms plus standards plus market forces. This can be a jolly group, but I see it as a refinement upon the Ted and Alice duo and will discuss it briefly in that context.

As we've seen, many combinations within the quartet of accountability strategies can be imagined, and some are often encountered in the real world of K–12 schooling. But we've also seen some basic incompatibilities, especially where Bob (compliance) and Alice (markets) are involved. Carol (experts) is a bit of a loner at heart, not entirely happy keeping company with *any* of the others because they invariably mean accommodating forces outside the profession. That she has to do this all the time doesn't mean she likes it. Alice has a go-it-alone tendency, too, inclined to believe that the marketplace is all-knowing and can be counted upon to confer the greatest good upon the greatest number without help from other forces. As for compliance-minded Bob, he's such a control freak that he'll keep company with anyone he suspects he has a chance of bending to his will. Ted (standards), though, is a pretty versatile guy who, under the right circumstances, can get along with any of the others. So long as one is relaxed about who sets the standards, what forms the rewards and interventions take, and who monitors and enforces success, standards-based reform can cohabit with any of the other three.

DECIDING WHICH IS BEST

In light of all these options, how is the perplexed policy-maker to map a clear path toward a sound accountability system for his state or community? He might begin by setting some basic criteria. Four are key:

1. Which accountability strategy focuses most directly on academic achievement?
2. Which is most apt to work effectively (i.e., to produce the desired results)?
3. Which is most amenable to implementation?
4. Which brings the greatest problems and the most negative baggage?

Let's take these up in turn. For simplicity, we'll avoid couples and trios and instead just review the four individual strategies against these criteria.

WHICH IS FOCUSED MOST DIRECTLY ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT?

Ted has got to be the winner here. Standards-based reform arose because of the need to focus education dynamics on stronger achievement among students. If Bob (compliance) or Carol (experts)—the older members of the quartet—had done a good job of accomplishing that, Ted (standards) likely would never have come along. As for Alice (markets), she concentrates on achievement to the extent that it matters to parents and other consumers. One might hope that's most of the time, although we know it's not always their foremost concern.

WHICH IS MOST APT TO PRODUCE THE DESIRED RESULTS?

This depends, of course, on what results are sought and how much confidence one has that bureaucratic compliance or professional norms will accomplish this. If we stick with improved student achievement as the chief objective, I hold out

scant hope for Bob (compliance) and not much more for Carol (experts), at least not while her professional norms have more to do with beliefs and ideologies than with hard evidence about effective school designs, curricula, and instructional methods. Ted (standards) has begun to prove himself in a few places—perhaps most famously in Texas and North Carolina, as well as some districts and a number of other countries—but (as we’ll see below) it’s hard to implement standards-based reform. As for Alice (markets), there’s plenty of evidence that private schools do a pretty good job both of producing relatively high-achieving students and of satisfying their clients. There’s mixed evidence with respect to charter schools, most of which are still new. And there’s conflicting evidence about voucher programs, although I’m persuaded by Peterson’s work that black youngsters benefit from them.¹

WHICH IS MOST AMENABLE TO IMPLEMENTATION?

Bob’s approach is relatively easy to implement—schools and local, state, and federal education agencies have been in a compliance mode for decades—but he isn’t very successful at producing superior results. That’s largely due to the fact that education is a field where manipulating inputs does not reliably translate into stronger outcomes. For example, tightening teacher certification requirements, installing additional courses and technology, or reducing class sizes only intermittently yields better student achievement. A further problem is that the successful implementation of one compliance scheme may interfere with the next: those tighter certification requirements, for instance, are apt to make it harder to ensure that a fully certified teacher leads every classroom. So are uniform salary schedules that require high school physics

¹See, for example, William G. Howell, Patrick J. Wolf, Paul E. Peterson, and David E. Campbell, “Vouchers in New York, Dayton, and D.C.,” *Education Matters*, vol. 1, no. 2, Summer 2001.

teachers to be paid the same as middle school social studies instructors.

Carol (experts) has always had implementation problems in public education, mainly because “the profession” is almost never fully in charge of key decisions, actions, and resources. Those NCTM math standards, for instance, may be well implemented and yet not do a very good job of preparing kids to pass the state math test if the latter is aligned with a different view of math (or not aligned at all). Even where NCATE gets its accreditation required for teacher training programs to win state approval, the legislature may also create an “alternative” certification scheme that bypasses those training programs altogether.

Ted (standards) is proving hard to implement successfully in many places. It’s difficult to reach agreement on standards, hard to get the assessments properly aligned with those standards, and painful—mainly for political reasons—to impose meaningful consequences on students, teachers, and schools. Where these challenges have been met (again, in places like Texas), Ted seems to work pretty well. But a great many states are tangled in their knickers when it comes to standards-based reform. They find it politically difficult to resist the many temptations to compromise standards, which can be done through more devices than most reform-watchers realize, some of them none too visible. First, most conspicuous are a state’s formal academic standards, which are widely available and much examined.² These can be strong or weak, easy or exacting. Second is the quality and rigor of the state test, which is supposed to conform to the published academic standards but often does not. Third is

²The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and I have done our share of this. See, for example, Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Michael J. Petrilli, *The State of State Standards 2000*, Washington DC: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, January 2000. See also Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Marci Kanstoroom, “State Academic Standards,” in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy 2001*, Diane Ravitch, editor, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001.

where to set the cut-off or passing score on that test. (It's possible to have a test that contains plenty of challenging questions but then deem students to have passed it even though they answer few of those questions correctly.) Fourth and finally comes the low-visibility but high-impact decision as to how many of the students in a school must pass the test in order for the school itself to be judged successful. With so many ways to let standards slip, it is little wonder that we find many states reporting far larger fractions of their students (or schools) being deemed proficient on the states' own measures than are judged proficient according to the standards set by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) for reporting results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).³ And even when a state holds firm in its standards, it may falter in the politically ticklish task of attaching rewards and sanctions to student, school, and teacher performance.

Alice encounters big political obstacles because the marketplace approach threatens the traditional interests and power structures of public education. It can also be difficult to design the right ground rules for such a system. Practically nobody favors a completely unfettered marketplace with zero policy involvement on behalf of the public interest. (Well, a tiny band of libertarians does.) But the policy questions quickly grow as intricate as the politics. For example, should children from wealthy families get the same vouchers as do children from poor families? What about disabled kids? Youngsters already enrolled in private schools? Should charter schools be funded on exactly the same basis as regular public schools? Which regulations should they not be

³For an early explanation of this phenomenon, see Mark D. Musick, "Setting Education Standards High Enough," Southern Regional Education Board: July 1996. Musick found that in twelve of thirteen states that he examined, a substantially larger fraction of eighth graders were said to meet their states' math proficiency standard in 1994–95 than scored at (above) the "proficient" level on the NAEP math assessments of 1992 and 1996.

exempted from? What rules should govern the boards and universities that “sponsor” charter schools? In what ways are *they* accountable?

WHICH SYSTEM CARRIES THE MOST NEGATIVE BAGGAGE?

The answer naturally depends upon one’s values, as what appears bleak to one policymaker can look rosy to another. Measured simply in terms of controversy, Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) cause the most trouble. They’re the newest and least familiar. Because they both emphasize outside-the-system accountability, they are especially objectionable to traditional education interests and dogmatists. Alice’s marketplace strategy carries the added burden of seeming to cater to “private” interests. On the other hand, Bob (compliance) and Carol (experts) bring problems of their own, notably the fact that they’re largely discredited in the eyes of governors, business leaders, and others outside the system who are pressing for stronger student achievement, more productive schools, and more effective educators.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Being relatively new and contentious, Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) not only have to prove themselves separately but also have to demonstrate that they can get along together. Though both come from “outside the system,” they follow different theories and many people believe they are incompatible. After all, standards-based reform is top-down, driven by elites that tell schools what results to achieve—and reward and punish them. Market-style reform is populist and bottom-up, relying on the preferences of clients to signal to schools what must be done and on the individual actions of schools and educators to satisfy those clients.

In today's education policy tussles, Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) each have many fans and partisans, but their advocates tend to be leery of one another. Advocates of the marketplace don't think a dirigist, state-run accountability system can ever work well, whereas cheerleaders for "systemic reform" doubt that markets will be good for schools, children, or the common weal.

The closest thing we have to a test case is charter schools. They are where we can most easily observe Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) cohabiting. These independent public schools of choice must answer to their customers via the marketplace or they cannot count on continuing. But because they are a genre of public schools, they are also answerable to government and accountable for fulfilling the terms of their charters, which are typically issued and monitored by some public authority (usually a state or local school board, sometimes a state university) and which nearly always incorporate the state's academic standards and tests as part of a school's accountability mechanism.

Charter schools, in other words, must answer in both directions: to Ted, for meeting the state's academic standards (or whatever standards are written into their contracts), and to Alice (i.e., to their client marketplace). In the real world, they are also accountable in sundry ways to colleges, employers, accrediting bodies, curriculum developers, athletic leagues, health departments, and so on. They never escape entirely from Bob's compliance regimen—they're subject to special-education rules, for example—and occasionally they're also subject to union contracts. But for the most part these schools are self-guided and free from much conventional red tape. Hence it's possible for many of them to get beyond external accountability and begin to develop elements of what Paul Hill and colleagues term "internal accountability," defined as "the ways the school leadership and staff work together on a day-to-day basis to ensure that

the school works for students and is therefore able to keep its promises to others.”⁴ This can also be seen as a special form of Carol-style professional accountability, one that’s more internally than externally referential.

The experience of charter schools suggests that Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) can live together under the same roof, although a school may feel some tension between them. For example, “upward” accountability for academic achievement might argue for hiring another math teacher or reading specialist so as to boost those test scores; but from the clients’ standpoint it may be more urgent for the school to replace its gym teacher, fix the rest room, or improve its before- and after-care offerings. Considering the limited resources of most charter schools, these trade-offs can be painful.

How well is charter school accountability actually working—and how sound a model does it offer the larger K–12 enterprise? There are signs that it’s working better than most, although we cannot yet know how it will do over the long haul.

Certainly the great majority of students and parents (and teachers) in charter schools are satisfied with them—and pleased to have made the change. Demand generally outstrips supply, both on the part of families (and staff) seeking places in existing charter schools and on the part of would-be charter operators seeking to launch schools (but often deterred by politically-imposed caps and lean fiscal rations). Market signs, in short, indicate that charters are satisfying their clients and participants. Another hopeful sign on the charter accountability front, though in somewhat backwards fashion, is the fact that eighty-plus of these schools have shut down or have been shut down. Some could not attract or keep students; in other words, market-style accountability

⁴Paul Hill, Robin Lake, et al., “Charter School Accountability,” Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, June 2001, <<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/chartacct>>, p. 13.

(Alice) closed them. Others ran into fiscal difficulties—occasionally corruption and illegality—that led their sponsor to pull the plug (i.e., Bob-style accountability). A very few have been closed due to academic (i.e., Ted-style) shortcomings. This brings us to the big unanswered question of charter accountability: whether they’re producing the requisite academic results. So far, the most we can say is that some are and some aren’t. The data from several states are encouraging; others are gloomier. Schools that have been around longer—and whose students have been enrolled longer—seem more effective than new ones. But with the average U.S. charter school barely two years old, the most that can be said is that it’s too soon to be sure.⁵

TAKING STOCK

What we really learn from observing charter schools is that they help us see the frailties and idiosyncrasies of the entire school-accountability enterprise. We learn that the top-down, standards-based version is only as good as the quality of a state’s standards and tests and the conscientiousness, wisdom, and toughness of a school’s sponsor. If Bob (compliance) and Ted (standards) are both in fine fettle, knowing what to demand and when to be lenient and possessing clear standards and sound indicators of performance, this can work very well indeed. If Carol (experts) is also in good shape, a charter school will honor the curricular, pedagogical, and philosophical values of a well-conceived and thoroughly researched program and will shun silly fads and ideologically driven practices. As for the marketplace side of charter accountability—Alice’s territory—that works well, too, so long as Alice is thriving—so long, that is, as the school is transparent; its clients are well informed, fussy

⁵For an extended discussion, see Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Gregg Vanourek, *Charter Schools in Action*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

(without being outrageous), and reasonably sophisticated; and enough decent school alternatives are available to them that their local education marketplace is vibrant with supply as well as demand.

The problem is that all four members of the accountability quartet can misbehave as badly with respect to charters as with conventional schools. Hanging a charter sign over the door doesn't immunize a school from accountability hazards. Bob (compliance) is a tireless control freak who exerts his authority more than he should, grabs for the rulebook whenever he can, and likes nothing better than to close loopholes that afford some schools more freedom than others. Carol (experts), as we have seen, has a loony streak, and charter schools are not always free from her daffier beliefs and practices. Ted (standards) has difficulty getting his standards right and his tests aligned. And Alice (markets) deserves a better education marketplace than she often finds herself working in. Even in the charter world, we find producers that are secretive with important consumer information, we find a dearth of viable school options, and we encounter families that care more about a school's convenience and amenities than its academic quality.

Now we've reached the central dilemma of school accountability. *None* of these approaches is idiot-proof. None is immune to bad ideas, distorted priorities, inept management, and old-fashioned laziness. Every one of them hinges on the sagacity, competence, integrity, and determination of those running it—no matter whether that's a governor or a parent. Each also depends for its success upon the creation of a reasonably consistent and fair system—think of this as the school accountability equivalent of the “rule of law”—rather than one that's quixotic, unpredictable, and prey to favoritism and politics. Yet the ground rules of all such systems depend in turn upon the wisdom, public-mindedness, and deftness of the policymakers who determine how they operate. (Yes, that's even true of the marketplace. Consider how a law limiting each community to two charter schools

dampens supply; consider, too, how dependent charter clients are on state-generated test data.)

So what to do? If none of the four characters in our little accountability drama is perfect, and yet we must somehow persevere, what's our best option?

The *worst* idea is to turn back to Bob (compliance) and Carol (experts). They had many decades to show that compliance and professionalism would produce solid results in U.S. elementary and secondary schools, and they failed miserably. So let's not persist any longer in pretending that the accountability secret rests with them.

I believe the prospect of success is brightest in the union of Ted and Alice (i.e., the intersection of standards-based, top-down accountability and market-style, bottom-up accountability, much as we have seen operating in the charter world). This combination doesn't operate flawlessly in the case of charter schools, to be sure. But it's superior to the available alternatives and worth trying to perfect.

In suggesting that we rely on *both* Ted and Alice, I contend that the couple is more powerful than either of its members alone. This is a point worth pausing on, for the very thought that they can coexist, much less that they can strengthen one another, will come as news to people who have come to regard these two forms of accountability as rival superpowers locked in a cold war for control of American education.

It's no secret that most devotees of top-down reform are cool toward the marketplace approach. They regard it as messy, uncertain, divisive, apt to leave the neediest children behind, and too tolerant of ill-conceived schools. But the converse is also true. Many market aficionados are wary of universal, big-government schemes, especially in education, where they've seen standards-based reform founder on the shoals of political correctness, unproven education theories, political cowardice, and dubious psychometric assumptions. Hence factions have emerged. Most people who care about these things have joined one side or the other. For them,

accountability is inseparable from their preferred reform strategy—and the other approach is suspect if not feared.

We've already looked at charter schools as evidence that these two systems can co-exist. It's worth noting one other prominent example. Florida has devised a standards-based accountability system that uses exposure to the marketplace as the ultimate "consequence" that can befall a failing school. That makes Florida the only place in America that has purposefully sought to harness the two forms of accountability in a comprehensive statewide system. (President Bush proposed something similar for the big federal Title I program, but Congress nixed most of it, including the school-choice component.) Enacted in 1999, Florida's "A+" plan assigns a letter grade to every public school in the Sunshine State based primarily on the school's performance on statewide tests. If a school gets an "F" for two years (out of four), its students become eligible for vouchers (i.e., can take their state dollars to the schools of their choice, including private and parochial schools).

So far, that stark fate has only befallen two Florida schools, and even they managed to crawl up to the "D" level the following year. (It is alleged by some that Florida has eased its grading standards for schools.) Nor did every pupil in those two schools opt to enroll elsewhere. Thus, only about fifty Florida youngsters have actually used vouchers to change schools via the state accountability program. Still, the "A+" design illustrates one way of yoking top-down, standards-based accountability to the marketplace kind—and suggests that the union of Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) is not limited to charter schools. Florida's approach is sometimes termed "exit vouchers" because it enables youngsters to escape from low-performing schools into the wider education marketplace.

This, too, is controversial. Anything that takes kids or dollars out of public schools (no matter how crummy) is inherently contentious. That's why Congress would not assent to exit vouchers at the national level. Yet at least one analyst

who has examined the Florida program judges that it was precisely the threat of vouchers that caused the state's failing public schools to tug hard on their own bootstraps.⁶ In other words, exposure to the marketplace—even a whiff of the marketplace—is an action-forcing consequence that can play a dynamic and constructive role within a regimen of standards-based reform.

Other scholars doubt that the two approaches mesh comfortably. In a paper prepared for the National Bureau of Economic Research, David Figlio and Marianne Page also looked at Florida. They contend that when vouchers are used as part of an accountability scheme keyed to school performance, youngsters who end up being aided are different from those who would be assisted by a more conventional voucher program focused on disadvantaged children.⁷ This is because the distribution of low-income children in the state differs somewhat from the distribution of weak schools.

Despite their paper's provocative title ("Can School Choice and School Accountability Successfully Coexist?"), all Figlio and Page really accomplish is to make clear to policymakers that a single program probably cannot serve two separate policy goals equally well, and one must therefore either prioritize goals or else enact two separate policies. The authors, I believe, fail to show a fundamental conflict between Ted-style accountability and Alice's approach.

Still other scholars contend that Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) actually need each other in order to attain the maximum education reform and student achievement. In identifying five key components of an effective accountability system, for example, Kenneth Wong lists "pressure from market-like competition" alongside "setting standards," "formal sanctions,"

⁶Jay P. Greene, "An Evaluation of the Florida A-Plus Accountability and School Choice Program," Tallahassee: Florida State University, February 2001.

⁷David N. Figlio and Marianne E. Page, "Can School Choice and School Accountability Successfully Coexist?" working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2001.

“support to build up school capacity,” and “support to build up student capacity.”⁸

Herbert J. Walberg and Margaret C. Wang observe that these two forms of accountability actually have much in common and are “reconcilable” in both theory and practice. Both, they note, arise outside the traditional structures of public education governance and seek to put pressure on that system. Thus, “both reforms diminish traditional control in which local boards mediated among state boards, local taxpayers, parents, teachers, and other groups. . . .”⁹ Both tend to concentrate money and control in individual schools while dividing power between those schools and external forces—and withdrawing it from the familiar public-education hierarchy. Instead of compliance with bureaucratic rules and procedures, both emphasize a school’s results. Both, in other words, weaken Bob’s control of the system. But they can easily live with one another.

The Ted (standards) and Alice (markets) pair is also at home with “tight-loose” management theory, which seems to underpin most successful modern ventures. In an organization run according to this theory, each production unit—in this case, an individual school—possesses wide authority to perform its work as it judges best but is held strictly accountable (by top executives, shareholders, etc.) for its “bottom line.” Its results are closely monitored. Yet it doesn’t have to produce them by following an elaborate manual of procedures. It is largely free to run itself. Thus, both accountability strategies overturn the ancient practice of public education (and most other government services), which is to regulate—Bob-style—via control of resources and processes rather than by each unit’s success in producing the desired results through means of its own choosing.

⁸Kenneth K. Wong, “Integrated Government in Chicago and Birmingham (UK),” in *School Choice or Best Systems*, Margaret C. Wang and Herbert J. Walberg, editors, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001, p. 166.

⁹Wang and Walberg, op. cit., p. 375.

INTERDEPENDENCE

To my eye, the greatest source of interdependence between standards-based and market-style accountability is that each offers a promising solution to a big problem besetting the other. This may, in the end, prove to be the shotgun that causes Ted and Alice to wed, even though their kinfolk are none too cordial. Like partners in any successful marriage, each turns out to fare better when the other is around.

The first problem is that standards-based (i.e., Ted-style) accountability systems are better at identifying failing schools than at fixing them. Indeed, in most jurisdictions, the list of failing schools doesn't change much from one year to the next, despite all manner of technical assistance, professional development, extra resources, the importing of celebrated "whole school" models, and, of late, more aggressive efforts to reconstitute and outsource them. It would take another essay to examine *why* all these interventions seem to make so little difference. Suffice to say, bad schools are extremely hard to transform into good ones, particularly when the agents of their putative transformation are lumbering government bureaucracies working within a political environment where myriad interest groups (especially the schools' own employees and their organizations) have great power to block changes that they dislike. (Observe what happened when New York City education chancellor Harold O. Levy proposed to turn a few of his many failing schools over to Chris Whittle's Edison Schools for purposes of transformation.¹⁰)

The upshot is that children enrolled in failing schools are apt to linger for many years in classrooms where they're learning very little. What's happened is that a pure Ted-style (standards-based) accountability system has succeeded in revealing shortcomings that it is incapable of fixing. That's obviously bad for the afflicted youngsters, but it also makes

¹⁰This saga is recounted in Edward Wyatt and Abby Goodnough, "As Bid to Privatize Schools Ends, Supporters Second-Guess Effort," *New York Times*, March 31, 2001, and Abby Goodnough, "Scope of Loss for Privatizing By Edison Stuns Officials," *New York Times*, April 3, 2001.

a mockery of standards-based reform, which, in this scenario, is not actually accomplishing the reform of troubled schools. Ted illumines the problem, but he cannot solve it.

What to do? Ask Alice to lend a hand. Bring market forces to bear. Move the children to more effective schools, or turn them loose to move themselves. In other words, whether through assignment or volition, help them make their way from the failing schools to others that are succeeding. This is all but certain to benefit the youngsters who do move. And, as we have seen in Florida, Albany, Milwaukee, and elsewhere, it may also trigger needed changes in the schools they are leaving, which betters the lot of those youngsters who don't exit. Though the leaders of those schools will grouse—this is, after all, a painful therapy—the loss of students and revenue, combined with the possibility of closure, at least concentrates their minds on the problems they need to solve.

Both the charter school and voucher movements have begun to yield evidence that bad schools and school systems eventually respond to competition by trying to rectify the problems that led students (and revenues) to flee them. No, we don't yet have solid, large-scale data on the transformative effect of marketplace accountability. But we have suggestive research by Carolyn Hoxby indicating that school systems produce stronger results when they face competition, and we have lots of anecdotes, case studies, and small-scale research on charter schools that generally point in the same direction.¹¹

¹¹A series of papers by Professor Caroline Minter Hoxby that illuminate this subject can be found on her Web site at <<http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers.html>>. Particularly germane is her paper entitled "School Choice and School Productivity (or Could School Choice Be a Tide That Lifts All Boats?)," draft prepared for National Bureau of Economic Research conference, February 2001. This can be accessed on the Web at <http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers/school_choice.pdf>. Additionally, see Clive R. Belfield and Henry M. Levin, "The Effects of Competition on Educational Outcomes: A Review of US Evidence," Occasional Paper No. 35, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Columbia University, September 2001. An abstract of this paper and a link to the PDF version can be found on the Web at <www.ncspe.org>.

This is all the more remarkable considering that most school-choice programs are as yet too small and new to have amounted to much more than a flea on the hide of an elephant in terms of their impact on the traditional school system.

More evidence is plainly needed. But there is reason to expect that the introduction of Alice-style competition into education will strengthen and vivify Ted-style accountability, even as it supplies salubrious educational alternatives for needy youngsters who might otherwise be stuck indefinitely in dysfunctional schools.

The converse is also true. Alice needs Ted. The education market is often flawed. Private schools, for example, frequently decline to take part in state tests because they don't want people making "simplistic" comparisons of their academic achievement. They prefer to rely on their reputations to market themselves to customers, perhaps burnishing their image as a "highly selective" school with "caring" teachers and solid college placements. Those attributes might all be true—but they might also be hype. Without a transparent marketplace based on uniform standards and rich with comparable and publicly accessible achievement data, one must trust every school to tell the truth. Thus, we could have a situation where schools are answerable to the marketplace, yet their consumers are unable to make informed choices among them. That leads in time to market failure. How can people know what school to choose—and resist false claims and unwarranted reputations—if they don't have the kinds of comparative performance data that are most apt to emerge from a system of uniform standards and tests? How will educators know which schools are most worth teaching in? How will prospective school founders know which education niches cry out to be filled with high-quality alternatives? How will policymakers know (for example) which charter schools deserve to have their contracts renewed? Absent data from a Ted-style, standards-based system, these various constituencies, stakeholders, and consumer groups may have

nominal freedom to hold schools accountable via market forces, yet those markets will be inefficient and ill-informed.

If we're serious about accountability, therefore, we do well to consider the union of Ted and Alice. It appears—like most good marriages—to be an instance where the combination is stronger than the sum of its parts.

As for that antenuptial agreement, it's a good idea not because we must anticipate divorce but because it eases things by spelling out important assumptions that should accompany this marriage. Alice must, for example, agree to press for school and market transparency, using both Ted's data and information from individual schools, and she must agree that all schools need to be serious about producing results according to Ted's standards, as well as about satisfying their customers. Ted must agree to set sound standards in core subjects without trying to dictate every school's entire curriculum. He must align his assessments with his standards and ensure that they are accurately and swiftly scored. He must craft a "consequences" system that includes market forces such that, for example, children can leave bad schools for good schools of their choice. Both Alice and Ted should agree to be polite to Bob (compliance) but not let him take over their household. They should also agree to welcome visits from Carol (experts) but only when she's behaving sanely. (When she is, she can infuse knowledge, spirit, and focus into the educators responsible for satisfying both Ted's standards and Alice's clients.)

We could, of course, add many more provisions to this agreement. We know that neither Ted nor Alice is perfect. We believe that marriage will tend to bring out the best in both of them, however, and dampen the worst. Setting some ground rules will surely help. But let's face it: accountability in education is tough. Nobody has devised a powerful yet risk-free strategy. We will, therefore, be taking a risk with whatever approach we follow. So we must remain vigilant. But let's give this marriage a chance.