Holding Schools Accountable: Performance-based Reform in Education
Helen F. Ladd (Ed.); The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1996, pp. vii+382, Price: $42.95 (cloth)

This book contains 9 papers presented at an April 1995 Brookings Institution conference organized by Helen F. Ladd of Duke University and includes an extensive introductory chapter written by her. The conference participants come from the fields of Economics, Political Science and Educational Policy. The point in common to all the papers is the quest for a more effective use of available educational resources at the high school level and below. The papers provide empirical evidence addressing two main approaches to accountability: (1) holding individual schools and teachers directly responsible through effective measurement and managerial incentives and (2) allowing parents more freedom to choose the schools for their children. Three of the papers report the results of empirical analyses of performance-based incentive programs in South Carolina, Texas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Michigan, and California. Two papers look at the then limited evidence concerning the effects of voucher programs, while the remaining four papers are concerned with the measurement of costs and the way funds are actually allocated across school districts.

Charles Clotfelder and Helen Ladd address the practical problems involved in assessing performance and how the South Carolina and Dallas public school systems have handled them. In particular, they focus on the difficulties of accounting for differences in socioeconomic background of students in a way that makes the distinction identifiable and justifiable to parents and staff when assessing the performance of individual schools. A second issue concerns the incentives given teachers to teach narrowly in order to maximize their students’ performance on the tests used to evaluate the teacher’s contribution to achievement.

Richard Elmore, Charles Abelmann, and Susan Fuhrman consider a similar set of issues in Kentucky and Mississippi, while also emphasizing the differences between relative and absolute measures of achievement and the political difficulties inherent to resolving these philosophical differences involved in the allocation of educational resources.

David Cohen looks at the difficulties of reform from within the educational system and suggests that the more likely outcome given the current political environment is an eventual abandonment of reform from within the public school system to one driven by parental choice and local control.

The next two papers turn to school choice as an alternative to the micro-managing of schools by educational administrators. John Witte provides a summary of the results known at the time of the conference suggesting that Catholic schools produce relatively higher graduation rates and greater enrollment rates in college for their students, especially for students at the lower end of the achievement ladder, despite a lack of evidence that tests scores are any higher for Catholic school students once one controls for other factors.

Caroline Minter Hoxby attempts to address the lack of experimental data on voucher programs by simulating the effects of a more extensive voucher program by drawing on data on differences across schools due to the
degree of subsidies given students in private schools. Her results suggest that a voucher system could improve test scores and accountability.

Hamilton Lankford and James Wyckoff use fourteen years of panel data from New York State to provide a careful documentation of where the significant increase in educational resources has gone in recent years. For example, while real spending per pupil increased by 24% between 1980 and 1993, most of this additional money was used for special education students who made up 11% of the student population. Real spending per pupil increased by only 7% for the other students.

Ronald Ferguson and Helen Ladd looked at data from Alabama to argue that smaller class sizes and teacher quality improved test scores suggesting that increasing the money used to educate students in the lowest spending districts would improve educational attainment there.

W. Steven Barnett provides an empirical assessment of some specific educational programs aimed at improving educational attainment of disadvantaged students in urban school districts. The programs all require a redistribution of resources to attain the objective. Barnett provides an evaluation of the effectiveness of each program.

William Duncombe, John Ruggiero and John Yinger use data from New York State to highlight a method for a more accurate accountability of the distribution of resources across school districts by controlling for the types of students enrolled in the school districts and the resources dedicated to teaching them. One result of the study is a clearer measure of the large differences in per-pupil funding (by type of student) across the state.

One strength of the conference volume is the introductory chapter by Helen Ladd, which provides an extensive summary of each of the papers and an acknowledgment of the various opinions expressed by the conference participants. An additional strength is the inclusion of extensive critical comments by conference participants. Eric Hanushek and Robert Meyer provide separate comments on the three papers on performance-based incentive programs, Thomas Kane on the two chapters on school choice, Jane Hannaway on Lankford and Wyckoff’s paper and William Clune and Richard Murnane on the three chapters dealing with measurements of cost. These commentaries are insightful and highlight the nature of the debate among the participants while also addressing the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies used in the empirical analyses.

There are clear differences among the participants concerning such issues as the role of merit pay for teachers, the likely effect of lowering class size, the need for channeling more money into the public school system, and the prospects for greater school choice. On the other hand, they do appear in agreement on a number of issues, including the importance of further experimentation before launching into full-fledged, often politically motivated programs that make no provision for evaluation and the need to increase students’ own accountability for their performance. More importantly than the consensus or disagreement among the participants is the richness of the debate and the clarification of the differences in the assumptions underlying these conclusions. The volume does a good job on this front.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to a debate that has finally caught the attention of the general public and the political process. Every state in the union is undergoing changes to their educational systems in order to improve accountability. Unfortunately, this process is often driven by political expediency without provision for adequate appraisal and follow-up. The decentralized nature of the U.S. school system provides an opportunity for extensive experimentation on a smaller scale prior to the implementation of grander programs. Educators and, in particular, politicians would be well advised to heed the advice coming from this collection of papers.

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Going to college: How social, economic and educational factors influence the decisions students make

This book offers useful insights about students’ post-secondary decision-making processes by focusing on the social, economic, and educational factors that influence high school students as they consider whether and where they will attend college. The authors present empirical data about the high school years to help assess the relative importance of such factors as academic ability, level of parental income and education, access to college information, and the influence of parents, counselors, teachers, and peers. The authors study the changing effects of these factors as students move through the three stages of the college choice process: predisposition, search, and choice. Information on college costs and student financial aid policies, for example, is shown to become important for students only when they are making the final choice of a college, while the same information is important to their parents at a much earlier stage.

Data for this longitudinal study is taken from surveys