Analysis of Accountability Ratings for Elementary Schools Texas, USA: Considering the School Growth and Students’ Demographics

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Abstract. The purpose of this quantitative study was to compare the Texas school accountability approach used from 2004 to 2011 based on a status-based model to a model that incorporates academic growth and student demographic variables. Information from three large urban school districts in Texas was analysed considering data from 398 elementary schools and the reading and mathematics TAKS test scores of 24,065 fourth and fifth grade students. Results indicated that the average school growth did not present significant differences between institutions with different accountability rating defined by TEA in 2011. Statistical differences were found when the average school growth was analysed disaggregating the students’ population by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and English language proficiency. A systemic approach must prevail for designing an accountability system used to judge the quality of education delivered at an elementary school. This research was an analysis of how an accountability system could be useful to evaluate school effectiveness based on standard-based assessment results. However, the use of only one measurement to judge a school’s efficacy regarding the quality education provided to students may be a reductionist and narrow approach.

Keywords: school accountability; standard-based assessments; academic growth; school ranking.

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly competitive, knowledge-based, and globalized world, having a strong public educational system is a priority for developing future generations of college-ready students and skilled workers. Education was a priority reform under President George W. Bush, and the No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (NCLB) had support of the public as a fundamental step to develop a high quality, equitable public education in the United States. The new reform improved federal financial support allocated to education, but required the state legislators to define content standards for testing each student from third to eighth grade. A core principle contained in NCLB was to hold educators accountable for providing quality education that might be reflected in performance on standards-based assessments. The NCLB policy defined school achievement goals based on the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). This indicator addresses the percentage of students who scored at or above the proficient level and defines school achievement for the academic year. Therefore, school accountability is defined around the concept of achievement status rather than school effectiveness (Forte, 2010; Linn, 2008). Based on this assumption, a higher number of students meeting the standards are an indicator of a higher quality of education provided by the school. Thus, differences on students’ performance on standardized tests illustrate the school’s quality. However, an accountability model based on a status approach does not necessarily represent a school’s effectiveness in terms of student learning and progress over time. Schools with students who score at or above the proficiency standard still achieve AYP even if the students did not show improvement from year to year. Consequently, concerns were raised whether accountability systems based on status or growth students’ performance is more appropriate (Ladd & Lauren, 2010; Mittleman and Jennings, 2018). Holding schools accountable for growth rather than status may become a fairer option, however further research should be conducted to determine whether growth-based accountability has positive impact on building a more equitable accountability system (Lauen & Gaddis, 2016). Ready (2013) suggested schools with substantial proportions of students living in high poverty may have an advantage compared with students from low poverty groups in showing academic growth based on value-added accountability systems. However, many of the growth-based accountability models that use value-added measures may produce ratings that are highly unstable highly influenced by class composition (Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). Certainly, more research is needed on determining the best use of accountability based on academic growth.

The purpose of this quantitative study is to compare the Texas school accountability approach used during 2003 to 2011, based on a status model to a model that incorporates academic growth and student demographics. The central research question in this study is: What is the difference between school accountability rating in terms of TAKS tests scores growth and the students’ demographic variables? The results of this research might guide the discussion about how a public education system, with a diverse population of students, should use end-of-the-year standards-based assessments scores to hold schools accountable about the quality of education provided. This research aims to