

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH...

John Tanner, author of *The Pitfalls of Reform*

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TRUE EDUCATIONAL
ACCOUNTABILITY

Q. As a public education advocate, what drives your passion?

A. *If we care about our country's future, public schools need to be the centerpiece of our civic democracy. But there are too many who continue to undermine our educational institutions for personal gain, spite, selfishness, or just a lack of understanding. This will have a devastating effect on our country if we allow it to persist. I intend not to let this happen. A new approach to accountability is the best means to convert the naysayers and create a culture of public schooling that can serve all students for generations to come.*

Q. Tell me about your opposition to psychometrically-based tests being used for accountability.

A. *Such tests are written to single dimensions of a domain in order to produce estimates of a student's relationship to others within that dimension. We call these estimates 'scores' which implies far more precision than they should. Think of a simple ordering of students from the furthest below to the furthest above average that would adjust somewhat on adjacent days and you get the picture. These scores can serve as a proxy for studying the larger domain, provided their use can tolerate the imprecision and the fact that the scores are not a direct or complete measure. Blunt accountability decisions about a student or their school made from such test scores risk being invalid at best, and dead wrong at worst.*

Q. You're not opposed to accountability?

A. *Just the opposite. I believe schools need to be some of the most effective organizations in our society and therefore deserve an accountability environment capable of supporting their mission. We know that effective organizations (which regularly achieve their mission) follow a surprisingly consistent set of frameworks to do*

this, and current educational accountability violates these frameworks to an embarrassing degree. My work these past 4-5 years has consisted of helping school districts convert to these frameworks, which we call True Accountability.

Q. Where do we go from here? This seems like a big lift.

A. *It is a big lift.*

Most educational accountability conversations focus on different tests or better formulas. Both of these prevent us from seeing the real underlying issue, and the more we give them our attention the less likely we are to solve the problem. We need an accountability capable of supporting schools in becoming the most effective organizations possible.

I'm reminded of a policymaker I met a decade ago who agreed with my arguments against test-based accountability, and yet being a lawyer, he admitted no understanding as to what educational accountability should or could be. He blamed the lack of such a system not on policymakers whom he said were simply filling a vacuum, but on educators who failed to realize there was a vacuum that needed to be filled. We must never allow this mistake to happen again. It is up to us to fill that vacuum – without educators involved, our system of accountability will never improve.

Q. History provides us with inspiring quotes about public education. What is your legacy quote that we might find inspiring future generations?

A. *"Those who demand simplistic solutions for complex issues in education would be wise to trade their contempt for esteem, their veiled prejudices against our most vulnerable communities for a broader world view, and their ignorance for understanding." ~John Tanner*

John Tanner is the author of *The Pitfalls of Reform* (Rowman and Littlefield) and numerous articles on educational accountability and the proper use of tests. He is the Executive Director of Test Sense and the Co-Director of the Texas Public Accountability Consortium.