

Roundtable News

Student Benefit as the Basis for Accountability

One might expect little relationship between a visit to a children’s museum and a formal presentation on assessment and accountability.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The two fit like peas in a pod at the Roundtable’s meeting in conjunction with the AASA Annual Conference in February in San Antonio.

At the splendid DoSeum, a museum for kids, children learn to DO, and in the process, discover that learning can be fun. Meanwhile, John Tanner’s presentation on developing a new accountability mindset emphasized student benefit, which would surely include joy in learning, should be the basis for school accountability. It all worked together.



Playground at The DoSeum in San Antonio, Texas

THE DOSEUM

The DoSeum is much more than a children’s museum. It’s a place where interactive fun and hands-on learning come together—a place where minds are always at play. It offers exhibits, programs, camps, classes, and field trips designed for all learners, encouraging young minds to explore the joy of learning by connecting to STEM, the arts, and literacy. If you get a chance to visit, don’t pass it up!

Designed for every child, all ages, races, ethnicities, and gender orientations, The DoSeum is a community for all, one committed to joyful learning and to diversity, equity, and inclusion. (Cont’d on page 2)



Dr. John Tanner

PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST

John Tanner, founder of braveEd and author of *The Accountability Mindset* (2021) and *The Pitfalls of Reform* (2013), covered a lot of the same ground that he addressed during a [Zoom meeting with the Roundtable in January](#). But he emphasized the need to think differently about accountability.

“We’re stuck in a compliance model of accountability,” he emphasized. “We worry about licensure, criminal background checks, and assessments, but none of these things guarantee a good school.” He went on to make the case for a “benefits-based system—a system based on the reasons an organization exists.” (Cont’d on page 3)

Join Us July 28-30, in Simi Valley, California

Join us this summer at The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum to discuss the four-decade consequences of *A Nation at Risk*. Step aboard Air Force One and imagine yourself off to negotiate with Mikhail Gorbachev!



THE DOSEUM, CONTINUED

Among its many offerings:

Semmes Foundation Spy Academy

What fun! Superintendents learned how to become spies using and communicating information across digital platforms. And they learned how to interact safely and respectfully online, while bridging the gap between the digital and real worlds through cooperative play.

Innovation Station

Innovation starts with tinkering. From blocks and balls to simple machines, Innovation Station gives kids space—physically and mentally—to imagine, create, and build. The focus is on the process, not the product. Children are encouraged to evaluate, try, fail, re-evaluate, and try again. One of our members created a short 12-sketch digital movie. Take that, budget tables!

Little Town

Organized by a mix of businesses along a wide, encircling boulevard, Little Town includes child-scaled immersive environments—each a familiar, themed space where kids learn by role-playing the adults in their lives.

Sensations Studios

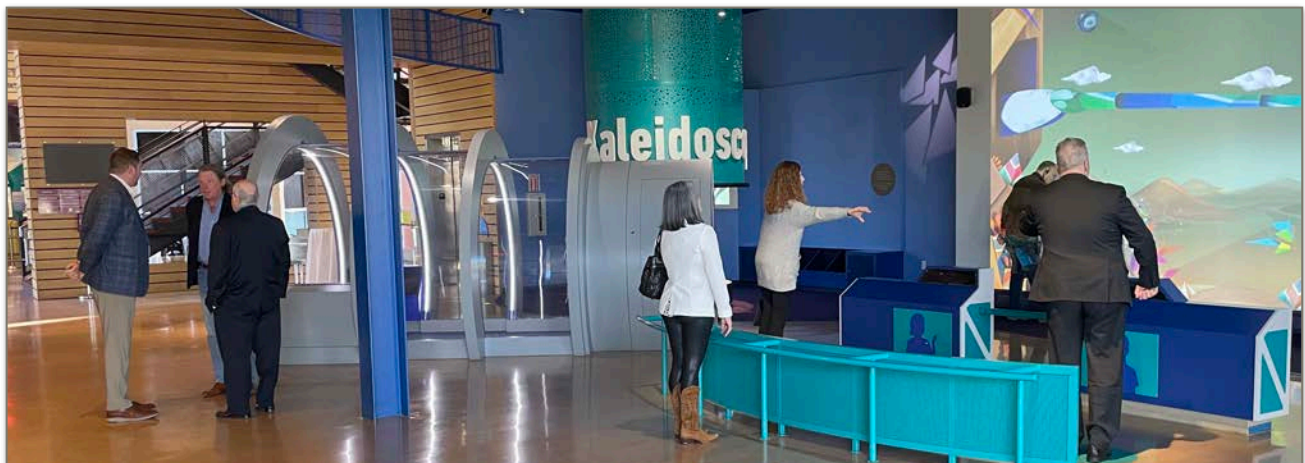
The Sensations Studio makes sound and light come alive. By playing with a wide variety of light and sound phenomena, kids explore the intersection between science and art. Although their attention may be focused on making music at the DJ Station, or bouncing a laser around on mirrors, students are gaining an intuitive understanding of concepts around sound and light.



Marie Ward (l), Steve McCammon (c), and Terry Thoren (r)
The building housing the museum gives just a hint of the learning fun inside.



Guests at The DoSeum reception experience the interactive exhibits.



JOHN TANNER, CONTINUED

As he discussed his thinking, it became clear that he views test-based accountability to be a system putatively designed for the benefit of parents but, in fact, designed to keep policymakers and taxpayers happy with a warped and cramped view of the purpose of public education. What we have, insisted Tanner, is an accountability system based on compliance that examines the past. What we need is a system based on the benefits it provides to its real stakeholders—the students—and looks to the future.

Stakeholder Benefit

He asked us to think about stakeholder benefit in different contexts. “Every profession,” he insisted, “exists to provide a set of benefits for its primary stakeholders.” If we are told an institution exists to address adverse medical conditions, help people in emergencies, diagnose complex human conditions, and heal the sick, we think of medicine. If the profession is aimed at putting out fires and rescuing cats stuck in trees, we immediately think of emergency services.

Well, what about a system organized around keeping kids safe during the day, developing citizens, focusing on young people’s strengths, and making sure they feel a sense of belonging? That’s not the state police or the FBI; it’s obviously the education system. But instead of developing an accountability system that would reflect the realities of the benefits we really want from schools, we’ve developed a punitive system that looks to the past, not the future, and seeks to root out failure.

Moreover, he pointed out, the current system stifles best practice because instead of encouraging schools that are doing an outstanding job with students from backgrounds likely to encourage them to drop out, it insists such schools pursue the practices (primarily of competition) of schools in wealthy communities primarily enrolling students who are likely to graduate no matter what the school does.

A Compliance Model and False Metrics

Imagine, asked Tanner, if we told physicians to adopt metrics similar to those that have been foisted on schools. Suppose we said: “Unless 75% of your patients improve, we’re going to take your license. What would happen?” It’s perfectly predictable, he thought. Instead of following best medical practice, physicians would start cherry-picking patients. They’d turn away from patients urgently needing high-quality care for complex challenges and turn toward those with more readily diagnosable and curable maladies. “Patient health becomes secondary to job security.”

No profession other than public education, he insisted, uses a compliance model of accountability because it produces a system that is about disciplining practitioners (doctors and teachers) not responding to the consumers (patients and students) while creating a miserable place to work, and making it hard to attract people. Where have we heard that recently?

Test-Based Accountability

“In Texas,” he observed, “we have a test-based accountability system for the ages. There’s actually 160 pages of ‘stuff.’ It’s not just that there’s too much testing; it’s that it has nothing to do with effectiveness. No matter how hard we work at it, we just ramp the problem up.”

Tanner brought up again two unidentified schools in San Antonio. One has an exemplary graduation rate, the other’s lags behind. But School A predominantly enrolls students who are likely to graduate no matter what the school does; they tend to come from higher-income and highly-advantaged homes. School B, while graduating fewer, enrolls many students more likely to drop out, students, in fact, that School A wouldn’t know what to do with.

“Then we make the mistake of thinking that School A should be the model because School B is deemed to be a failure.

“If you’re in a school the state labels a failure, your efforts to defend best practice will result in people accusing you of being an apologist.” We need, he said, to face up to the question of whether we’re teaching to the test or doing what is best for children. “The fact that that choice exists tells us we’re in trouble. The more I think about that, the angrier I get.”

School vs. Non-School Effects

Researchers have known since the Coleman Report in the 1960s, that average tested achievement in schools is made up of school-based effects (let’s say teacher quality, funding, and curriculum) and non-school effects (let’s say household poverty, nutrition, unemployment, and access to health care). Indeed, different studies over the years have demonstrated fairly conclusively that 70-80% of performance outcomes depend on out-of-school factors.

Test results cannot tell you anything that was learned in the school. They combine in-school and out-of-school effects together and then discuss the results in public forums as though everything is attributable to the school.

The Primary Stakeholder Needs to Be the Student

We will build two entirely different accountability systems depending on how we answer this question, he pointed out. “Am I accountable to the state for high and rising test scores, or am I accountable to the children in

JOHN TANNER, CONTINUED

this community for the benefits the community expects when the children come to my school?” How that question is answered will create two fundamentally different organizations.

That reality, he insisted, means that the child is our primary stakeholder. “That’s why we’re here. That’s why we’re in education.”

Defining Accountability as Benefits-Based

When we think about building an accountability system that puts students at the heart of the matter, we need to build an accountability system that “boils down to three things: It boils down to being responsible, to being answerable, and to being easy to understand to all our stakeholders.”

Above all, he insisted, being answerable requires telling the truth about your schools. And that truth has to be explicable to your stakeholders. “Imagine if your doctor tossed the results of your lab tests at you and told you to figure it out yourself.” Yet, he warned, we lead with complex, technical data that the typical citizen has trouble understanding. Be responsible. Be answerable. And be explicable.



Steve McCammon (l) and John Tanner (r)

What are the stakeholder benefits for schools? Parents want us to educate their children, care for them, focus on their strengths, make sure the kids have a sense of belonging, and develop them as citizens.

“Look the stakeholder in the eye and say, ‘Here’s where we’re effective and why. And here are areas where we’re not as effective as we need to be.’” That gesture, “is the most trust-building gesture in any accountability system.”

We can establish a benefits-based accountability system that is meaningful to stakeholders by understanding that every profession exists to provide finite benefits to primary stakeholders, offer honest accountings for each benefit, tell a true story using evidence, and account for the future shape of the organization.

Focusing on benefits is how we ensure that our kids have a future and how our country has a future, he concluded. Test-based accountability fights that every step of the way. A test-based system is designed to keep grown-ups out of trouble, but at the cost of the kids who need our help the most.



Steve McCammon opens the breakfast and introduces John Tanner.



Jim Harvey comments during discussion of Benefits-Based Accountability.

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