From his first days in office, President Bush made education reform one of his chief priorities. Congress responded with a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that requires states to ensure that all students reach a certain level of proficiency within the next 12 years. Schools that fail to meet their achievement targets will face sanctions as harsh as being “reconstituted”—their staff being fired and forced to reapply for their jobs. The new legislation has enjoyed nearly universal bipartisan support, but the future remains uncertain. Are ESEA’s goals realistic, or do they fundamentally misunderstand the nature of schools and learning? Do the states have the resources and the political will necessary to meet these more stringent requirements? And will school leaders take up the challenge or throw their hands up in frustration? No one has concrete answers, but one thing is sure: accountability is now the coin of the realm.

Richard F. Elmore doubts whether failing schools have any clue how to turn themselves around

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Andrew Rotherham wonders what the critics of accountability are trying to protect

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