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# Across Classrooms: School Quality Reviews as a Progressive Educational Policy

*Doug Knecht, Nancy Gannon, and Carolyn Yaffe*

## **Introduction**

Educators, politicians, and citizens have been embroiled in debate about how to hold schools accountable for the type of learning experiences all children deserve. Despite decades of improvement efforts and a consistent tightening of policy screws, students across districts and schools continue to have extremely uneven classroom experiences, and a shared understanding of educational quality remains elusive. The intent of No Child Left Behind was to shine a spotlight on inequalities in outcomes and incentivize systems to do better through rewards and consequences. However, the narrow lens of test scores is insufficient and has been shown to result in perverse behaviors (Payne-Tsoupros, 2010; Vogell, 2011). Our own experience has demonstrated to us that this narrow approach to accountability can result in classrooms of lower quality, where intensive pressure around test scores on educators yields classrooms filled with test prep activities. These are schools in which the experiences of children and teachers are not prioritized and student voice is irrelevant. In the past few years, a growing number of people have been questioning the place of high-stakes testing in educational accountability (Strauss, 2015). In some parts of the country, the “opt out” movement has grown to include a significant proportion of the student body in the grades given standardized tests in elementary and middle schools; for example, in New York 20% of families across the state refused to allow their children to sit for the tests in 2015 (Harris, 2015).

While recent governmental action at the federal level has acknowledged this public discontent with the current system, establishing guidelines to avoid “overtesting” (King, 2016), we need a coherent approach to accountability that sheds more light on the educational causes of inequitable outcomes and illuminates a path toward creating higher- quality learning experiences for all students. In order to address disturbing variations in student learning experiences across classrooms, education leaders must look toward accountability processes that are more progressive, such as a school quality review (QR). QRs can more readily embody central principles of progressive education by modeling the kind of critical and constructivist approach in school leadership that we expect to see teachers use in classrooms. In this way and others, when done well, the QR fosters a progressive form of accountability in which a passive, transmission, or “banking” concept of education (Freire,

1970) is replaced by an approach that privileges the collective and collaborative construction of understanding, the honoring of both student and educator experience and voice, and the incorporation of multiple stakeholders, including families, in a more transparent and democratic process regarding high-stakes decisions. It is our deep belief that an educational accountability system with elements like these at its core is much better positioned to strengthen the positive impact of public schools and districts on our larger society. Without equity of quality learning experiences across classrooms, the goal of social justice through education will remain unachieved.

Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, and Pittenger (2014) include school QRs in their description of a new paradigm of accountability. Similarly, Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder (2008) culminate their seminal text on accountability with a model that has school inspections at its core. Various educational policy and support organizations have agreed with the potential power of school QRs to provide an improved accountability approach (Neill, 2010; Smarick, 2016).

School QR policies have been rigorously road-tested since 1992, when England launched its school inspection process (Jerald, 2012). Other countries followed suit, from the Netherlands to Singapore to New Zealand, using an inspection system to assess school quality (Whitby, 2010). In the United States, various state education departments, including those in Massachusetts, Ohio, and New York, have employed a diagnostic or QR process. New York City, the largest district in the country, implemented its first qualitative reviews with a process called the Performance Assessment in Schools System-wide: Essential Elements of Exemplary Schools (PASS) in 1996. After that process faded, almost a decade later the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) engaged an English company, Cambridge Education, to help reconstruct a school inspection process. Since 2006 NYCDOE's school QRs have served as the counterpoint to the quantitative student and survey outcomes in its accountability model. Along the way, the QR policy and process have evolved, becoming owned and implemented internally by the NYCDOE. As an indicator of the strength of this work, the New York State Department of Education consulted with the NYCDOE school quality team as it launched a similar accountability policy in 2012, called the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness.

As leaders of the QR for the NYCDOE from 2010 to 2015, the authors of this paper agree with past and current thinking that school inspections are necessary for a more developmentally meaningful and student-centered educational accountability approach.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, there is evidence that school inspections can drive change processes that focus on self-reflection and capacity building (Gustafsson et al., 2015). This paper will focus on other key advantages of investing in a QR process, as well as on a set of challenges and considerations gleaned from our involvement with implementing it on a large scale. We will focus on how the QR, grounded in a progressive vision, can leverage student experiences across classrooms to foster and sustain change toward high-quality schooling for all children.

## **Advantages of a QR Process**

Districts and states lack firsthand knowledge and direct evidence about essential aspects of education within schools they oversee, such as school culture, including the quality of relationships between and level of expectations for students and adults; strength of leadership in visioning, setting goals, and leveraging a variety of data sources to improve practices; coherence of curriculum across grade levels and disciplines; beliefs about and approach to pedagogy; types and use of assessments; effectiveness of adult learning systems and teaming structures; impact of professional feedback to staff; and engagement of families and community partners. Although school surveys have become more commonplace, surfacing perspectives on the quality of these types of important aspects of schools, the results cannot reveal the rich, nuanced story of the lived experience of students and adults within a school community. And while some critics may deride these aspects of schooling as merely “inputs,” we ask: How can one feel secure about high-stakes accountability decisions made in the name of equity—including reallocating or increasing funds, changing school leadership and staffing, and closing a school—without first-hand qualitative data on the quality of education across classrooms?

Specifically, a QR process offers four critical components of effective accountability that cannot be easily achieved otherwise:

- A vision of “what good looks like”
- A path toward coherence across workstreams within a school

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1 The opinions in this paper are solely those of the authors and are not meant to represent the thoughts of other past or current NYCDOE leaders of the QR process.

- A dialogue with the school community that creates levers of change through targeted strengths and areas for improvement
- A collection of data across schools for district leadership decision making about policies and resource use

Integrating these components into an accountability system can lead toward a more progressive set of policies and supports for students and educators across schools. We will use the story of New York City's QR to describe how.

**A Vision of What Good Looks Like.** The QR process is an articulation by system leadership of what good looks like at the school level. With the development of the QR in New York City, educational leaders shared a set of criteria that stated what was important and valued across the entire system of approximately 1,700 schools. Leadership planted a stake in the ground about what we believed all students deserved. This articulation is crucial when the use of hard data and cycles of political change often encourage public education systems to change their “theme.” A strong QR rubric and process provide a roadmap of quality, based in research and practice, that remains fairly consistent over time. The roadmap includes a clear instructional compass, defining the expectations we have for student learning experiences across classrooms. In New York City, our theory of action was simple: To impact what is happening across classrooms, one needs to focus energy on what is happening across classrooms. To this end, we built a rubric<sup>2</sup> that centered on curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, relating those three indicators of quality to the concept of an “instructional core” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). The quality of these instructional core indicators underpinned the QR work as a whole.

While the rubric provides indicators of quality in relation to each area of a school's work, it does not dictate or mandate a specific implementation strategy. Rather, it asks school communities to articulate their vision of pedagogy and demonstrate both how their work aligns to that vision and what the impact has been for student experience and outcomes. In fact, among the leaders of the QR work, we have had internal debates: *What if we visit a school that has a form of pedagogy that seems particularly repressive to students but which shows dramatic test score gains? Should we include stronger language in the QR rubric around our preferred pedagogical methods?* We decided instead to ensure that the QR process and rubric guard against this issue—in a way that testing-based accountability does not—by including measures around school culture and social-emotional well-being that require reviewers to examine

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2 As of the publication of this article, the current NYC DOE QR rubric and other related resources can be found at <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/review/default.htm>.

the quality of student experience and the equity of inputs and outcomes for students in a school community. We believe this idea is essential to the use of the QR as part of a thoughtful and robust accountability approach that does not prescribe a specific method for achieving positive experiences for all students. The QR process then becomes the vehicle for critical exploration of the impact of the practices that the school believes support student learning, as opposed to a tool for the imposition of any particular educational approach.

To gather data using the rubric, we developed a school review process that entails collecting evidence from classroom observations, reviews of documentation, and interviews with various constituents, including students, families, and partner organizations, allowing us to identify any patterns of the quality of learning across classrooms (see Figure 1). Again, we asked the school leadership to articulate how its community believed students and adults learned best. From there, we were able to begin constructing, together with constituents, a comprehensive picture of how the school was fulfilling its vision and mission based on those beliefs.

## Figure 1. Overview of the QR Process

### Sample Quality Review Schedule

#### In Advance

- School writes self-reflection, identifying goals and practices as they relate to indicators on the rubric
- Reviewer receives and analyzes school data and school self-reflection
- Reviewer formulates questions based on data

#### Day 1

- Reviewer and school administrators meet for a discussion of school context and an interview centered around rubric indicators, including beliefs around teaching and learning
- Reviewer meets with parent focus group
- Reviewer meets with larger student focus group
- Reviewer and leadership visit 3–4 classrooms and debrief throughout the walkthrough
- Reviewer observes teacher team in practice
- Reviewer and leadership meet to reflect on the day and identify any big questions/concerns/gaps

## Day 2

- Reviewer and leadership visit 3–4 additional classrooms and debrief throughout the walkthrough
- Reviewer meets with smaller student focus group to review student work artifacts
- Reviewer meets with union representation if requested
- Reviewer reflects and writes draft summary
- Reviewer meets with leadership and, using a protocol, shares preliminary outcomes; school leadership team responds and provides further evidence or clarification as desired
- Reviewer notes that final outcomes will be delivered in a report within 6-8 weeks

Concurrently, the rubric focused school leaders on the importance of research- and evidence-based practices, such as having teacher teams engaged in collaborative inquiry to review student work. We also used the QR rubric to strategically introduce new policies, such as establishing a teaching framework to elevate instructional practices and implementing the multiyear integration of the Common Core State Standards. While we acknowledged that some of these elements of the QR were perceived by school communities to be mandates around an approach to schooling, we did our best to convey why they were essential, and how there was still flexibility in implementation. Over time, although we tweaked our language and expectations, we maintained our vision of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as the critical instructional core and of the centrality of the school community's beliefs about learning and teaching.

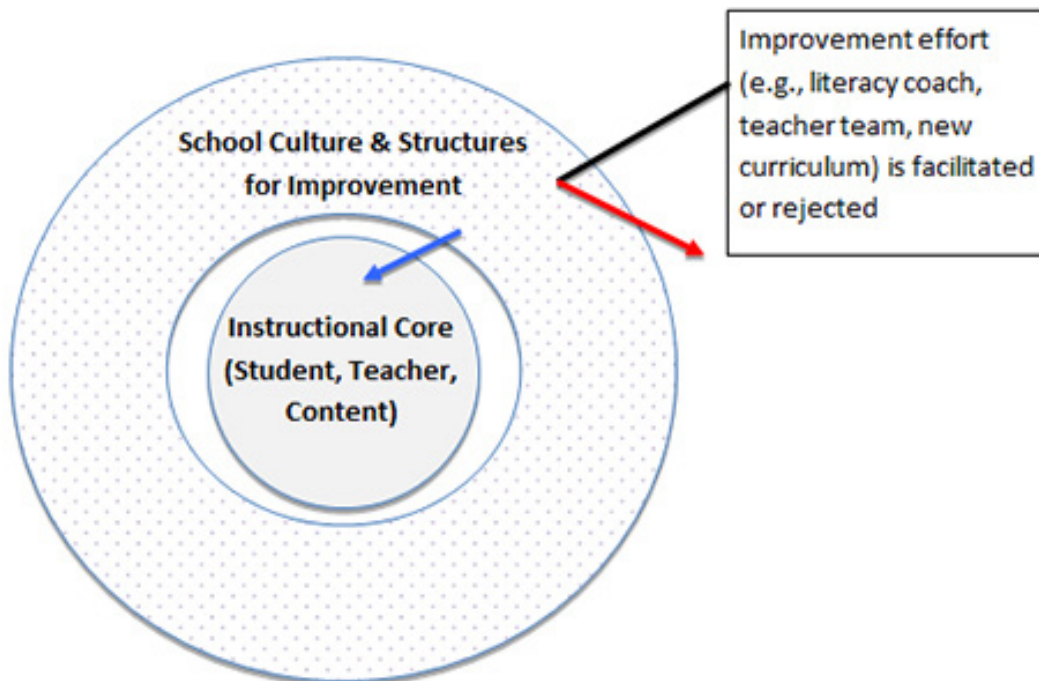
As a side note, our experience tells us that a QR process, while always based in research, should be developed within the context of a district as much as possible. Although some level of stability is essential to organize learning and capture data longitudinally, it takes input and refinement in partnership with stakeholders to build investment in the rubric as a meaningful school accountability and improvement tool.

**A Path Toward Coherence.** The QR rubric and process offer an unparalleled opportunity to foster coherence of highly complex and interrelated workstreams. In New York City, the QR served to identify the key strands of work in a school community and stretched school leaders to align these strands in support of student learning. When we first began reviewing schools, it was common to find leaders who would articulate goals and then show a budget that did not support those goals or who provided a set of observations in which teachers did not receive feedback related to the goals. It

was also common for reviewers to rate a school’s professional development and assessment practices as “well developed,” even though, in their classroom practice, teachers didn’t demonstrate learnings from their professional development experience, and even though assessments didn’t drive learning improvements.

As a result of observations like these, we revisited our framework and placed the instructional core within a ring we defined as *school culture and structures for improvement*<sup>3</sup> (see Figure 2). This was intended to indicate that (a) the ultimate impact of a school is in what students learn as a result of the interactions between teacher, student, and content, and (b) school culture and structures either facilitate or hinder improvements to this instructional core. For example, if the principal hires a literacy coach to improve pedagogy and student outcomes, the school’s culture and structures (e.g., how teachers respond to a coach coming into their classrooms and reviewing literacy data with them in team meetings or whether time is provided for those activities) will either enable this investment to reap benefits to the instructional core or, like an immunity system, reject this attempt at improvement.

**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for the Quality Review**



3 This idea is based on the notion of school culture playing a buffering or facilitative role in school improvement efforts, which one of the authors, Doug Knecht, was exposed to during graduate coursework with Dr. Richard Elmore of Harvard Graduate School of Education in the spring of 2006. Staff at HGSE could not provide a published reference for this concept.



With this framework, we articulated the connections between individual rubric indicators (e.g., the budget, the structure for teacher collaborations, and professional development, which should all be clearly aligned to school goals for student learning). In addition, we illuminated how the three overarching aspects of a school community—a culture of high expectations and of student and family involvement; structures for the management of time, personnel, data, and other resources to improve supports and opportunities; and the instructional core itself—fit together and relate to one another. Through the QR process, the foremost message of the framework—that impact on student learning experiences across classrooms is at the center of a school’s work—reinforced this key principle of progressive education.

The QR rubric and associated professional learning were also refined to increase coherence of the policy. As an example, the indicator that measured the effectiveness of resource use at the school level was revised to more clearly require that student artifacts and teacher practices show evidence of the impact of the use of those resources.

**Levers of Change.** Even the most challenged schools have elements of promise: teachers who connect with students, a kind and inclusive climate, an art or music program that engages students, so that they come to school early or stay late. Too often, accountability policies demoralize school communities by confronting them with a litany of improvement items that obscure what the school does well and that lack a clear, high-leverage anchor to the school’s work. Just as meeting students where they are is a guiding principle of progressive education, acknowledging a school’s strengths is critical for motivating stakeholders to collaborate, build on those strengths, and realize improvements so that all students are supported in their learning.

The most valuable part of a QR for school leadership may be that it provides a prioritized, focused set of levers to improve the school’s instructional core. Improvement cannot occur simultaneously in all areas of need when a school is developing or worse, staving off chaos (Payne, 2008). Feedback must present targeted and individualized assessments for each school. In New York City, we moved towards offering no more than three areas of improvement for schools rated below the acceptable score of “proficient.” Similar to the findings of a study of British school inspections (McCrone, Coghlan, Wade, & Rudd, 2009), school leader surveys consistently demonstrated that they found the conversation and feedback during QRs to be a useful lever in shaping improvement with their school communities.

As the QR policy evolved, we saw that using the experiences students have across classrooms and providing targeted feedback toward systemic improvements that were rooted in a common vision of what good schooling looks like could impact school improvement efforts on a larger scale. In many ways, we worked to deliberately go beyond an evaluation stance and be a model for the kind of learning we wanted to see at all levels of the system. This included creating a set of formative alternative QRs. These were differentiated processes designed to align to the state of a given school's development. Schools performing well on a range of quantitative measures and past QRs experienced Peer Quality Reviews, in which a small team of educators, including other school leaders, visited the school for a day and used the QR rubric to provide feedback on an area of growth the host school identified. Schools assessed as "developing" on a QR (i.e., just below proficiency) were given a Developing QR the following year, a one-day visit facilitated by their school support network, typically a trusted partner. These schools then experienced a formal QR one year later, with the understanding that schools required more than a single year to foster the kind of improvement efforts needed to truly make a meaningful impact across classrooms. To keep the focus on learning and growth, the written reports and improvement plans for the alternative QRs were not made public, and there were no related accountability consequences for the schools in that year.

It is important to note that the idea for differentiated reviews came from our annual process of seeking input from various stakeholders throughout the system. A principal proposed the Peer QR criteria and policy. Later in the QR's development, a student activist organization, the Student Voice Collaborative, met with us and recommended we find a way to allow students to shadow a QR to improve student insight and input into the QR process. We agreed to create this opportunity for students to better understand how their schools were being evaluated, and two students published an article about their experience (Parham & McBroom, 2015).

**Data Across Schools.** In addition to offering a common vision for educational quality grounded in a progressive approach, another important advantage of the QR is that it provides district leaders a common foundation for professional learning, resource allocation, and school improvement. A defined set of criteria and a dataset based on those criteria afford a clear entry point into work with individual schools, with groups of schools within a district, and with those charged with supporting school improvement. The data from the thousands of New York City QRs over time strengthened the district-level conversation and helped ensure that important decisions were made based on data trends gathered on these visits.

For example, outcomes from the first years of the QRs indicated that over half the schools earning a proficient rating overall had scored below proficient on the quality of instruction. We shared this data with the school system at large and asked: Can we remain comfortable with this incongruity? How should we address this issue? The data also showed, as mentioned earlier, that professional development was often rated highly at schools with poor pedagogy. While one could make the case that some schools were in the process of improving their classroom practice through strong professional development and the QR captured this moment of growth, it was highly unlikely for that to be true for large numbers of schools, year in and year out. This data engendered conversations about long-held assumptions regarding the quality of adult learning and the role of school leaders in that work. It also fueled a policy decision to prioritize a handful of the indicators in the QR by giving twice as much weight in the scoring system to indicators focused on the instructional core, teacher teaming, and the use of resources by school leadership. No longer could a school surmount its instructional deficits in a QR simply by demonstrating that the adults in the school community were happy with the learning environment and opportunities *they* were afforded. The student learning experience accordingly remained the focal point of the adults' work.

We shared with the larger community of educators that during QRs the indicators assessing the quality of curricula and pedagogy were consistently rated the lowest, and then began providing a variety of professional learning experiences to build a more calibrated understanding across the system of what rigorous curricula and effective pedagogy look like. We also found and generated high-quality exemplars of curriculum and aligned assessments, which were shared on an open, online repository called the Common Core Library.<sup>4</sup>

## Implementation Challenges and Considerations

There were three central challenges we experienced during the evolution of the QR:

- Addressing the compliance mindset with which many educators approached the QR process
- Establishing the credibility of a qualitative assessment whose outcome was perceived in the field to be more related to the reviewer(s) assigned to a given school rather than to the quality of the schooling that was observed and documented through the process
- Balancing the various goals of the QR, which included providing detailed and useful feedback to the school community while simultaneously reporting out on school quality to other stakeholders, most notably parents

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4 Currently, the Common Core Library can be found at: <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/CommonCoreLibrary/default.htm>

In *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right*, Rothstein et al. (2008) quote Campbell's Law, which states that measures of social processes used for important decision making will be subject to corruptive pressures that distort the social processes they are intended to monitor. Despite the best intentions of the QR to elevate a shared instructional conversation, school communities often became subject to Campbell's Law. It was common for school leaders to approach the process with a compliance mentality; unfortunately, school support and supervisory staff frequently worked to "prepare" the community for a QR rather than making investments in sustainable planning practices that would yield positive outcomes for students beyond the QR experience. An analysis of NYCDOE's PASS review process from the 1990s yielded a similar insight: the work of school improvement can be overwhelmed by the press of accountability (Tobias & Miller, 1999). In our experience, the typical result of this compliance mindset was a dog and pony show: a set of superficial changes the school made and presented during the two- to three-day review. In the worst cases, large amounts of school time were spent on the preparation of voluminous binders of documents to be presented that had little effect on the QR rating, since the rubric and process required evidence from across classroom visits and interviews with constituents as the foundation for quality judgments.

In a connected challenge, both school leaders and quality reviewers asked for checklists of activities that, if completed, would lead to high levels of performance on the rubric. Although a key advantage of a QR process is the shared understanding of what good looks like, creating this shared understanding across a school district is a formidable undertaking. Linking high-stakes decisions to QR outcomes exacerbated these challenges and reduced the power of the QR as a formative tool for improvement. This insight was another motivation to create formative reviews, such as the Developing QR and Peer QR, which were intended to reduce corruptive pressures and focus on genuine school improvement.

Maintaining consistency of performance across reviewers, in terms of both rating on the rubric and adhering to review protocols, was another serious hurdle to establishing and maintaining system-wide investment in the QR as a fair and useful tool. There were more than 70 reviewers charged with facilitating these evaluations, who had varying degrees of desire to be involved in the process and of commitment to its value. Therefore, a great deal of reviewer training and performance management infrastructure needed to be put in place as a foundation for the work. Investment of both time and human resources is essential for the QR process to be powerful, and both can

be prohibitively high; thoughtful integration of this work with the right supervisory roles by the appropriate individuals is paramount.

To maximize resources and effectiveness, we learned that consistency is improved with a smaller, stable group of reviewers focused on sharpening their abilities to transform the low-inference observations they collected during reviews into shared norms and a common understanding of quality within the school community. In addition, QRs should be a primary aspect of instructional leaders' work, not a secondary responsibility, and it should be deeply connected to and inform other strands of their work, such as school supervision and support. We also learned that reviewers, like teachers and students, should be organized into small, cohesive groups that regularly examine and reflect on their work, their practice, and their experiences. We then consistently leveraged this learning to develop a common understanding of the QR rubric and processes among reviewers and others in the district working with and in schools. However, high turnover of education leaders, along with the changes that come with an election cycle, created hurdles in establishing a consistent reviewer group over any significant length of time.

One of the greatest challenges of using the QR as one of the two major tools of the district's accountability system was meeting the expectation that the evidence and outcomes from the process provided descriptions of a school's quality that were clear to both educators and noneducators. Like all professionals, in discussing their day-to-day work, educators use professional language that many inside and outside the system refer to as jargon, or "edu-speak." In New York City, the high bar for evidence for ratings meant that QR reports were typically too long and not easily understood by the general public. Over time, we began to envision ways of summarizing the key findings and producing more accessible versions of these more technical reports. Continued work needs to be done to find ways to address this particular challenge.

A final consideration touches on the power of listening to constituents and, related to this, continually working to tweak the language of the rubric and the process to maximize its usefulness across the system. The QR team held annual conferences with scores of stakeholders, from principals and reviewers to central office leaders and collective bargaining representatives, asking for feedback on the QR process and rubric. This was more than a political maneuver. As mentioned earlier, very good ideas flowed from these exchanges that improved the QR. In this way, we moved away from the intense debates we had in 2010 around the language in the QR rubric to the acceptance of the QR as a roadmap of strong practice just two years later. Without this level of investment in a more democratic approach to policy construction and refinement, the energy of

educators within the system would have continued to be spent on the arguments between the adults rather than on focusing on the quality of children’s learning within our schools, across classrooms.

## Conclusion

Juxtaposing the evolution of the QR work in New York City with other qualitative review processes, we see that many of the challenges we faced—such as the struggle with interrater reliability—are common to all these efforts (Tobias & Miller, 1999). As mentioned earlier, both the findings of a study of the British school inspection system and our own analysis of survey data from principals indicated that the formative aspects of the review were the most powerful; this can be difficult to communicate in the public sharing of reports or to translate into data to inform district decisions. These common issues lead us to think that they are tensions that school district teams must continually manage and tend to, as opposed to issues that will yield to a definitive solution.

Despite the challenges, we strongly believe that the QR work in New York City has been instrumental in transforming the accountability conversation into a more nuanced one about how adults organize to improve the learning experiences of all students and how the entire district defines and measures what good schooling looks like. We are not suggesting that progressive educational practices will necessarily flourish through the implementation of a QR process. However, something like an inspection process is needed if we agree that schools and districts should be held accountable for reaching all learners in meaningful ways so that our public education system contributes to increased equity in our society. By shifting from a narrow view of high-stakes moments to a more progressive systems approach that focuses on a critical dialogue around beliefs about learning and on the impact that the efforts of adults within a school community have on student experience, districts and states can move beyond remote diagnosis and build stronger, more robust systems and structures that model reflective and constructive practices and engender continual improvement. In this way, a school system can realize its articulated vision for teaching and learning across classrooms, so that all students get the education they deserve.

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**Nancy Gannon** started teaching as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand and has taught gifted and struggling students in Baltimore and New York. In 2004, she was the founding principal of a school focused on leadership and civic service; then Nancy moved into NYC district leadership role, refining the Quality Review and building instructional resources. Now at Student Achievement Partners, she supports districts and states in ensuring that students have high quality instructional materials.



**Carolyn Yaffe** is currently an educational consultant, working to support district, school, and leadership quality nationally. Prior to her current role, Carolyn spent seventeen years with the New York City Department of Education. Highlights of her time there include serving as the Executive Director for School Quality and as the founding principal for the Academy for Young Writers, a small high school in Brooklyn. She began her career teaching high school English in the Bronx.