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Katherine Bike on “Accountability”

Language isn’t neutral. The words we use shape what we’re able to think — who deserves what, who’s responsible, what’s up for debate and what’s already settled. Most of the time, we don’t notice it happening.

This is Vocabulary Excavations — not dictionary definitions, but excavations. What does a word *actually do* when we use it? What does it make easy to believe, and what does it make almost impossible to say?

This week: **accountability**.

accountability (*n.*) First known use: c. 1400 in English; mid-14th century in Anglo-French.

“The state of being subject to reckoning; the obligation to give an account of one’s actions or responsibilities.”

From Old French *acontable*; from *account* + *-able* — **“liable to be called to account.”**

From Latin *accomptare* — “to account.” From *computare* — “to calculate, to reckon.”

From *putare* — “to reckon, to count; to clear up, set in order.”

The concept of account-giving has ancient roots — in record-keeping activities related to governance and money-lending systems that first developed in Ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome.

Accountability shares its root with *accounting*. **To be accountable, originally, was to produce a count — of properties or money held in trust.**

The original sense had no ethical weight at all.

Computare. To reckon together. To tally. **To bring the numbers into view so that everyone could see whether what was held in trust had been managed honestly.**

No judgment. No moral charge. Just: show the work. Account for what you were given. Let the reckoning happen in the open.

Accountability, at its root, is a transparency mechanism. It exists to make the invisible visible.

That's worth holding onto — because the word has traveled a long way from that original meaning. And in education policy, it has developed a very specific directional problem.

The excavation

In contemporary education policy, *accountability* sounds like scrutiny of power. It sounds like oversight — the mechanism by which institutions answer for their decisions, their spending, their outcomes.

In practice, it mostly travels downward.

Accountability in education policy is applied to teachers — through **evaluation systems, value-added measures, performance ratings**. It is applied to students — through **standardized tests, promotion requirements, graduation benchmarks**. It is applied to schools — through **letter grades, report cards, improvement plans, state takeovers**.

It is applied, **with considerably less force**, to the policymakers who design those systems. To the legislators who fund them — or don't. To the private operators who receive public dollars and answer to no elected board. To the appointed officials who administer programs without releasing the data that would allow anyone to evaluate whether those programs work.

The word that sounds like scrutiny of power is mostly used as scrutiny of the people power acts upon.

This isn't a new observation. Education researchers have named it for decades. But in Tennessee right now, **the asymmetry is so stark it's almost impossible to miss** — if you're looking.

Public schools in Tennessee are subject to: **state curriculum standards, certified teacher requirements, TCAP standardized testing, annual report cards, school improvement designations, public audit, open meeting requirements, elected board governance, and federal accountability frameworks under ESSA**.

Private schools receiving EFS voucher funds are subject to: **registration as a non-public school and a nationally norm-referenced test of their own choosing, with anonymized results submitted to the comptroller**.

That's the reckoning. That's what *computare* looks like in 2026 Tennessee — **applied in full to public schools, reduced to a paperwork requirement for private ones receiving the same public dollars**.

The original meaning was to bring numbers into view so everyone could see. One side of this equation is visible. The other is deliberately not.

The selective application

Earlier this year, Tennessee lawmakers killed a transparency bill that would have required a public report on EFS program demographics. The Tennessee Department of Education declined to release enrollment data, arguing it wasn't required to track it. **Testing requirements for the ESA program were rolled back — right after data showed public school students outperforming their voucher counterparts.**

Each of those moves was made in the name of reducing burden on private schools. Each of them reduced accountability. And each of them was made by lawmakers who **invoke accountability constantly** — as a reason to evaluate teachers, grade schools, and justify state takeovers of underperforming districts.

Jenny Mills McFerron of EdTrust-Tennessee named it clearly: lawmakers have repeatedly invoked accountability and transparency as core values, but **have chosen to wield them selectively — to protect the wealthy and target the most vulnerable students in the state.**

Selectively. That's the operative word.

Accountability isn't selective in its original meaning. *Computare* — to reckon together — assumed that the reckoning applied to everyone holding something in trust. The ledger didn't exempt some entries. The count included everything.

When accountability becomes selective — applied to public schools with full force, waived for private ones — it stops being a transparency mechanism. It becomes something else.

A standard applied only to some is not a standard. **It's a target.**

What accountability should mean

The through line of this series has been about what public governance actually is — and what gets lost when it's replaced.

Governance established the mechanism: **a system that steers and remains reachable, that has a feedback loop connecting the institution to the people it serves.**

Choice revealed the trade: **individual exit replacing collective voice, consumer choice replacing governance choice.**

Private named the cost: **separation from public accountability, the money crossing the line while the oversight stays behind.**

Accountability is where those threads converge. Because if accountability were applied consistently — to every institution receiving public dollars, public or private, elected or appointed — **the asymmetry would be impossible to sustain.**

Public schools are held to standards that make their performance visible, comparable, and subject to consequence. Private schools receiving the same public dollars are held to standards that make their performance **difficult to see, impossible to compare, and largely free from consequence.**

That's not accountability. **That's the appearance of it** — applied to the institutions that were already transparent, waived for the ones that aren't.

Computare. To reckon together. In full view. For all of it.

That's what the word means. That's what Tennessee's voucher programs are designed to avoid.

This is the fourth entry in a five-part series on the language of privatization. Last week: *private* — what separation means in a governance context, and what public money funds when accountability doesn't follow it. Next week: *reform* — the word that makes dismantling sound like improvement.

Thanks for reading Strong Public Schools – Updates from Katherine Bike, District 4! This post is public so feel free to share it.

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