

Program Improvement Through School Evaluation

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What happens when an external visitation team evaluates a school? A recent survey of selected high school superintendents considers the effects on staff members, students, and the community.

Throughout the nation, over 1,000 secondary schools are involved each year in school evaluations as a condition of continued or initial accreditation by one of the six regional accrediting associations. This organized effort on the part of schools and the regional accrediting agencies is viewed with different levels of enthusiasm.

Administrators view the evaluation as an opportunity for faculty members to work together in addressing the school as an institution, thereby breaking out of their individual compartments or departments and studying the manner in which the parts contribute to the whole. Teachers raise questions concerning the degree to which the visits make a difference in the operation of the schools. Professional evaluators often express concern because the results of the evaluations are not presented in measurable terms. Parents often attach great significance to the process and perceive the evaluation report as an indication of the quality of the school and the steps that must be taken to assure continued excellence in the school's educational program.

School Evaluation Assumptions

The process of school evaluation as practiced by the regional accrediting agencies involves three phases: self-study, visitation, and imple-

mentation. In most instances, the self-study is a structured process involving use of a guide, either the *Evaluative Criteria* (published by the National Study of School Evaluation), or some regionally developed instrument based on a similar set of assumptions.

One major assumption is that the faculty of a school should be involved in the self-study if a valid picture is to be secured and if successful implementation is to be attained. A second assumption is that there should be obvious links between the school's stated purposes/objectives and the educational program and experiences provided for students. A third assumption is that the school can be meaningfully evaluated by a visiting team composed of peer educators who spend from three to four days in the school conducting intensive observations and interviews.

One final, tacit assumption is that the faculty and administration will be willing to work together in a cooperative manner in an "after-hours" setting to complete the self-study. In today's world of master contracts and teacher militancy, the staff's willingness to complete self-study activities at the end of the school day is becoming an increasingly unrealistic expectation. Schools are finding that released time must be provided if teachers are to participate. Teachers are also beginning to review the previous self-

study and implementation activities to determine if meaningful changes have taken place since the last evaluation.

In an effort to secure additional credibility for the evaluation process, the regional accrediting associations are devoting increased attention to the implementation or "follow-up" activities that are expected of schools. In many instances, the evaluation has been viewed as being concluded when the visiting team's report is filed. Rather than leaving such important activities to chance, however, schools are now being required to submit periodic reports concerning steps that have been taken to implement the recommendations emanating from the self-study and visitation.

The basic tenet underlying the school evaluation process is that any school can be improved through the three-phased process of self-study, visitation, and implementation. This contention is misinterpreted by those outside observers who often view such activities as resulting in a "pass" or "fail" pronouncement on the school. In sharp contrast to the situation at the turn of the century when schools were first accredited, the focus of activities is now much more oriented toward school improvement rather than toward inspection or monitoring. These latter functions have become major concerns of the various state education agencies as they have become more active in the various aspects of regulating the schools in their respective states.

Perceptions of School Administrators

Some interesting perceptions were found in a recent survey of a statistically selected sample of 10 percent of the superintendents of accredited high schools in the nineteen-state area served by the North Central Association (NCA); a total of 307 persons participated in the telephone interviews.

An independent research firm conducted the structured interviews using a standard format. Additional information from principals was secured through a questionnaire submitted with the school's annual report to the North Central Association; responses were received from 3,654 of the 3,737 principals of schools accredited by the Commission on Schools of the North Central Association. In each instance, the research findings reflect the personal perceptions of the

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respondents, but these are persons in leadership positions in the schools contacted and their ability to develop and maintain accurate perceptions is critical to their administrative success.

Principals and superintendents throughout the nineteen-state area served by the North Central Association strongly endorsed the NCA evaluation program. Among the superintendents participating in the telephone survey, 91 percent indicated that the evaluations had been of

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"strong" or "some" benefit to their schools. In open-ended responses, the superintendents indicated the merits of such evaluation in that it:

- Provides direction for the school;
- Raises the level of the school's awareness of its strengths and weaknesses;
- Forces the school to evaluate and improve programs and instruction;
- Provides another point of view for the school through the observations of the visiting team.

One area of particular interest was the perceptions superintendents had of staff members' attitudes toward the evaluation process. Attitudes were viewed as either "very positive" or "somewhat positive" by 89 percent of the participants. Some of the perceived benefits were the process of involvement accruing from staff participation in the self-study, the prestige and pride resulting from accreditation, and the "forced" review of the school's program on a periodic basis. In many instances, this type of evaluation may be the only organized effort taken by the school to improve the quality of its program.

In responding to a similar set of questions, principals indicated that, in 55 percent of the cases, staff morale had improved as a result of the evaluation activities. In responding to other questions, principals agreed by 74 percent that educational opportunities for students had improved, by 82 percent that the total evaluation

process had contributed to constructive changes in the operation of the school, and by 70 percent that the evaluation process was a good response to the public's demand for accountability. As a further illustration of positive reactions to the evaluations, over 70 percent of the principals indicated that additional support and greater community acceptance had been fostered through school evaluations.

Principals expressed considerable interest in having evaluations focus on product and outcomes rather than on input, context, and process; 36 percent favored this modification in the evaluation format; 28 percent were uncertain; and 36 percent were opposed. In examining the current mode of operation, 74 percent of the principals indicated that it should be modified to be more applicable to the realities of education. Although some persons question the merits of the visiting team—contending that the self-study and follow-up activities should be sufficient—66 percent of the principals surveyed endorsed the continued use of the external team.

As state education agencies have recently become concerned with needs assessment and planning activities for local schools, the necessity for cooperative activities has become increasingly evident. For example, 60 percent of the principals queried in the NCA survey contended that school evaluations by regional accrediting agencies should be scheduled concurrently with evaluations by state agencies.

Implementation

A current area of major concern among the regional accrediting agencies and their member schools is related to the steps that can be taken to assure that as much attention is given to the implementation or follow-up as is given to the self-study and visitation. Some individuals fear that when a school becomes quite involved in the self-study, its high level of anxiety during the visitation undergoes a post-visitiation "letdown"—at the very time when interest should be at a peak. The entire process will have been of little value if momentum is not maintained or regenerated in the implementation phase to provide assurances that educational and programmatic changes are made to enhance the quality of student learning.

Rather than expecting the school to implement each recommendation of the visiting team, we could, according to one suggested approach, classify the various recommendations into the following categories:

- Those that can be implemented immediately;
- Those that require additional funds;
- Those that require further study on their merits;
- Those that are rejected because of staff disagreement concerning their value.

The concern of the accrediting agency is not with the number of visiting team recommendations that are implemented, but with the efforts made by the school to become involved in a continuous process of school improvement. That may mean that none of the team's detailed recommendations would be implemented, for the school may have moved to another level beyond those concerns addressed in the self-study and visiting team reports.

As a means of school improvement, the established school evaluation process provides excellent opportunities for staff participation in program analysis and refinement. Even though the peer concept involved in the external visitation may be questioned by some critics of the evaluation process, it may be one of the strongest process components—for the credibility of the observations and recommendations is in all probability enhanced because of the respect felt for "peers" contrasted with the skepticism shown toward experts whose knowledge and recent experience may be more theoretical than practical.

Alternative Approaches

Each of the regional accreditation agencies is constantly reevaluating its procedures and materials, as well as developing more sophisticated training packages for chairpersons and members of visiting teams. As school faculties have become more stable and less susceptible to paternalism, an obvious need has arisen for alternative approaches that schools may use in the self-study and for alternative organizational patterns for the visiting teams. In the more innovative approaches to the self-study, increased

attention has been given to the school's purposes and objectives and the necessity to review them in terms of their relevance and the degree to which they are operational or are capable of being made operational. Another alternative in the self-study has been for the school to focus its major attention on certain "gestalt" or greater concerns, leaving until the implementation phase any discussion of individual subject matter or support areas.

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Trial programs have been used in which external teams visit several schools in a district simultaneously or concurrently. The impetus for this development has come both from the local district and the accrediting agency, for each has recognized that the traditional mode of "one school at a time" has resulted in the devotion of insufficient attention to articulation or the manner in which the different schools relate to each other. Interest in this alternative exists in districts that seek to have all schools on one level engage in the activity at the same time and also in districts that desire to have all schools that serve a geographical area become jointly engaged in a total evaluation process.

Rather than being seen as an activity mandated by some distant external agency, the process of school evaluation is increasingly being viewed as a cooperative activity between the local schools and the regional accrediting agency. The two forces are uniting in an effort to adapt the process so that it will have maximum impact on the total educational program of a school district. [E]



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