

Project 81: Reestablishing Partnerships

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In Pennsylvania, efforts to identify worthy outcomes of schooling and to reforge partnerships between school and society have begun to meet with success, as noted by these authors.

"Wadja learn in school today?"

"Why do I hafta do this?"



These questions reflect those that are being asked by students, citizens, and educators throughout the nation. These and similar questions fall within four major areas of concern regarding public education:

1. Student achievement
2. School discipline
3. Budget/economy
4. Exceptional children

What questions are citizens really asking about their schools? They have asked in the courts why children are awarded high school diplomas when they cannot read adequately. They are asking why school costs continue to increase when a decreasing number of children are being served. They are asking why the special needs that many a parent perceives in his/her own child are not being met. They are asking questions that seem to suggest that schools should provide solutions to all of the problems of our society—vandalism, unequal opportunity, violence, diminishing natural resources, nutrition and health, and poverty.

Teachers and other professional educators add to the list of questions and concerns:

How can we meet individual needs and keep track of individual progress without being submerged in a sea of paperwork?

How can we serve the needs of our youngsters when certain school programs are cut for fiscal reasons?

How can we evaluate our own work and be evaluated fairly?

How can we stay in control of curriculum in the face of the exploding knowledge mass?

How can we participate in decisions and use our expertise for the good of our students?

College and university faculties echo many of the same questions, and raise some additional ones:

How do we know when we are being effective?

Why do youngsters come to us with diplomas, but without the necessary skills to pursue higher education?

How can we serve the recurrent educational needs of the public?

What questions plague the staffs of state departments of education?

Since state education agency functions include regulation, advocacy, the channeling of public funds to schools, the dissemination of results of research and curriculum development, and the facilitating of partnerships within the educational systems, many questions are raised when state agency persons work to perform their functions:

What useful data are available for legislators and other policy-makers?

How can we help to maintain quality of education at a time when both numbers of students and quantity of resources are declining?

How can regulations be supportive rather than burdensome?

How can we support development of cohesive curriculum?

How can local and state agencies be mutually supportive?

What does history have to say to the system of public education?

How can we plan an educational system to meet future needs?

And of course the youngsters say to us:

- Why do I have to learn that?
- Why do I have to wait for everyone else?
- That's too hard for me; I don't understand.
- What sense does it all make?

There are many new efforts to reconsider the schooling process and its results. In Pennsylvania, our effort to identify outcomes of schooling and to reforge partnerships between school and society is called Project 81. We see that school has been historically a part of the social order and that it must be responsive to its society. During the twentieth century, the links between schools and society have become increasingly attenuated. The recent cry for accountability from the public must alert us that our relationships with society-at-large have frayed.

In 1976, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, in response to the questions and issues raised earlier, prepared a five year plan (hence the title Project 81). The plan called for:

1. The establishment of a state project office
2. The selection of 12 volunteer districts that would work through the developmental aspects of the plan
3. Gathering of people's expectations about schooling
4. The translation of those expectations into graduation requirements which will serve as the

"What'd you get?"



focus for curriculum analysis/development efforts

5. Developing the policy, regulation, and legislation to support the revised programs.

Important to each phase of the plan are two vital watchwords:

1. Involve as many publics as possible
2. Do it as economically as possible.

In January 1977, the 12 model districts were selected to provide demographic and geographic diversity. Each selected a coordinator for local project activities. In mid-February, the coordinators began to meet with the state staff to discuss and modify the process by which expectations of the public would be gathered and analyzed, using a modification of a process that was developed by the Batelle Institute through funding of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. Over a period of seven weeks spent together, interspersed with time spent "back home," many elements of the project's effort have been clarified.

Across Pennsylvania, from Erie to Philadelphia, from Washington City to Montgomery Area, from Pittsburgh to Lancaster, from Upper Merion to Avon Grove, from Bucks County to West York, from Pine Grove to Rockwood, and in various statewide committees, groups of people have been gathered to think and talk about the essential question: "What should a high school diploma guarantee?"

Thousands upon thousands of persons interested in the educational process have volunteered their time and effort toward completing the statement: "A high school graduate should

be able to _____." Meeting in large and small groups, in auditoriums, church basements, and private homes, these people have spent countless hours providing data upon which local districts can refocus their educational goals, objectives, and priorities.

Since the process is ongoing at this time, conclusions about the data would be premature. However, it is evident that people want the schools to prepare students for the realities of life. In addition to substantial concerns about the acquisition of basic skills, citizens are asking that students be able to:

- "Manage personal finances. . . ."
- "Make decisions. . . ."
- "Get along with one another. . . ."
- "Make effective use of leisure time. . . ."

Project staff and coordinators are now working at organizing this information in a systematic fashion so that it can be of use to curriculum workers, teachers, and administrators. The next phase will require the validation, verification, and prioritization of this information.

A key element of Project 81 is the extension of statements of expectation into statements of competence. For purposes of the project, a definition of competence has evolved from the statements of the people. *Competence is seen as the application of a process or skill to knowledge in a life situation.* In this context, the question "Why do I have to learn this?" takes on a dynamic new meaning for educators. In Pennsylvania, we are attempting to come to grips with the question of application of the knowledges and skills (processes) that school is intended to deliver.

In order to promote transfer of learning to life situations and to ease the transition from youth to adulthood, use can be made of the many learning resources that exist in the community-at-large. We are looking hopefully toward education programs that will capitalize upon the willingness of business, industry, social agencies, government, and many other community resources to be involved as partners with professionals in the schooling process.

The final essential dimension of Project 81 is a provision for continual review and renewal. We are well aware that the speed of change in our society is increasing geometrically, and that the



"I think I can. . ."

goals or outcomes or results of education, as well as its delivery systems, must be reassessed with greater frequency than has been true in the past. We are also concerned that such review and renewal should be done in a holistic and unified way. Good arguments can be made for various individual reforms. There are a multiplicity of marvelous ideas available to us. However, if we consider all of these piecemeal, we will not respond adequately to the increasingly complex concerns of our publics.

In the Pennsylvania effort to develop mutual support systems and networks, Project 81 is attempting to reforge partnerships between professional educators in school districts and the citizenry, between professional educators in school districts and those in institutions of higher education, between school district personnel and state department of education personnel, between industry and education, and between student groups and teacher groups.

We believe that these partnerships are desirable. We believe, or assume, that the separation of school and society, the turning of boys and girls over to schools, coupled with a demand for accountability for the schools, tends increasingly to divide people whose efforts need to be brought together.

We assume that the development of mutual support networks can assist us in examining the school as a structure, in examining the ways in which we have allocated time and space, human and monetary resources, and materials and efforts to the education of the young.

We also assume that state agencies and policymakers can work as partners in the use of data. This partnership has the potential for delivering improved legal, fiscal, and technical support to schools.

We believe that a clear, and jointly-arrived-at statement of competency outcomes of schooling can help us all to focus our efforts. Teachers can focus their efforts better; so can students.

We assume that clear statements of competency outcomes can result in standards that are more absolute, less comparative, and that such standards will make it easier for professional educators to bring their trained judgments to bear on needed educational processes. Then we will at last be able to individualize in ways that before this

have not been possible for all children, each one of whom is exceptional in his/her own right.

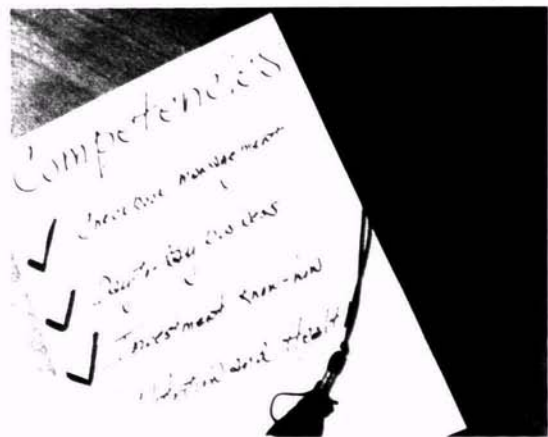
Finally, we assume that clearer statements of competency outcomes should result in greater clarity in the process of certifying that a student is ready to graduate from high school. A high school diploma should guarantee certain knowledges, certain powers, and certain abilities to apply process and skill. Either an employer or a college admissions officer should be able to rely on the diploma as certifying the possession of specific competencies.

As Rabbi Howard Bogot of the Pennsylvania Citizens' Advisory Committee says: "The private and public life of both youngsters and adults yearn for experience of:

- Significance (I'm somebody)
- Authenticity (I'm real and honest)
- Power (My decisions make a difference).

Project 81 has the potential to bring various groups of people together, in the setting of the public school, to inspire a methodology that will bring these yearnings—indeed dreams—to reality."

Society has become too complex for us to leave discussions about schooling to any narrow segment of the population. We need the broad philosophic base that can only emerge from the entire society. We recognize that the democratic process of gathering such a broad philosophic base is both painful and slow. It is cumbersome to deal with thousands of statements of expectancy. While respecting the integrity of each statement,



"Now, I know I can. . . ."

it is necessary to combine them, and ultimately to re-ask the society which outcomes it values most highly. The clamor of democracy at work is loud, but it's a musical sound. Imperfect as this process is, it seems to be the best form of governance that humanity has been able to achieve, and the process that we in Pennsylvania are choosing to use as we seek to develop not only fresh statements of the outcomes of schooling, but fresh approaches to the achievement, assessment, and certification of those outcomes. ⁹⁷

* For more information about conceptualization of Project 81 and statements of competence, contact Project 81 Office, Pennsylvania Department of Education, P.O. Box 911, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17126.

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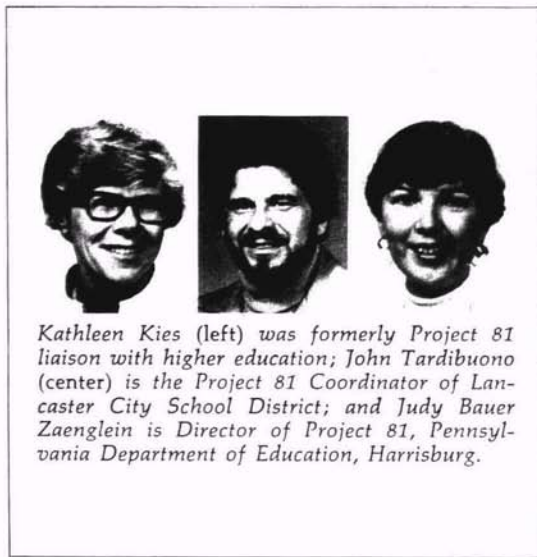
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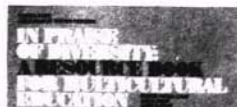
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