

A Conversation with Stuart Rankin

Stuart Rankin is Assistant Superintendent for Research, Planning, and Evaluation of the Detroit, Michigan Public Schools. In this interview by Ron Brandt, Executive Editor of Educational Leadership, he talks about creativity in educational planning.

EL: How did you come to be a planner and evaluator?

RANKIN: Well, I'm a legacy. That used to worry me, but now I'm proud of it. My grandfather was a school superintendent. My father was president of the American Educational Research Association, president of a forerunner of ASCD, and one of the first directors of research for a major school district.

I didn't want to go into education; I wanted to get away from the family tradition. But when I was in the Army I set up a course for my buddies who wanted to finish high school so they could go to college on the G.I. Bill. I used to teach math on Monday nights, English on Tuesdays, history on Wednesdays, and science on Thursdays. I didn't know enough about any of them, but I got the materials and did my best.

I found this so interesting that when I got out of the Army I went back for a certificate in elementary education and started teaching. Of course, that experience in the Army was only one factor; my father

was another. You see, Detroit has had only a few directors of research. The first was Stuart A. Courtis; the next was Paul T. Rankin; and my name is Stuart Courtis Rankin. I was named after the first one by the second, and I'm his son.

Between 1956 and '64, I went East every summer to help with the teacher training part of Harvard's Master of Arts in Teaching Program. We would have students and interns in the mornings, and give methods courses in the afternoons. It was a rich experience for me because it gave me a chance to interchange ideas with people from all over the country. We were teaching some of the new math even before the days of Sputnik. I began to do inservice teacher education in Detroit, giving demonstration lessons.

In 1964, I came to the central office as a curriculum coordinator. Two years later I was asked to be Director of the Michigan-Ohio Regional Education Laboratory. The lab developed three programs, including a teaching behavior improvement system based on inter-

action analysis, microteaching, and student feedback. It was a support system for teachers; we were trying to build self-renewal. Well, the Feds didn't understand that. At that time they thought the only thing worth developing was something you could pick up and hand somebody. Our funding was cut off, we were one of the first five or six labs to die, and I came back to Detroit as assistant superintendent for research. Since then we've added evaluation and planning to my responsibilities.

The Creative Process

EL: And how would you describe what you do now?

RANKIN: I try to protect about a quarter of my time to, well, "create" is not a very humble term, but that's what it is. If it's not creation of a new idea, it may be a new combination of existing ideas. I see my role as contributing to institutional renewal.

EL: How do you go about it?



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RANKIN: For one thing, a person has to gather the best thinking he or she can, and that means meetings. It means conversations with people, putting together an odd mix, bringing line people in on discussions. It means avoiding closure too early, identifying the real problem.

For example, let's say you have a problem with staff attendance, and it's getting worse. Now, sometimes you have to use a stick. If somebody isn't coming to school on time, one of the things you do is walk up to him and say, "Why don't you come to school on time? You're out too much." You have to confront the problem.

But if all you do is use your computer to identify people who have high absentee rates, and that's your only approach to the problem, it won't get solved in the long run. You have to ask, "Why aren't people coming to work? Why do they try to avoid it?" It probably means a staff morale problem, so one has to ask whether or not it's a satisfying place to work, whether or not people feel they have a say in things that matter.

The point is: Some problems can't be solved through analysis. You can't take a direct approach; you've got to back away and work with models, metaphors. You draw upon your experiences, look for novel explanations, different relationships among elements of the situation.

EL: So you gather ideas, and you consider alternatives. Then what?

RANKIN: You have to write. There comes a time when you've met with people, you've talked with everyone, you've gotten as many thoughts as you can. That's the time you sit down *alone*, and

write. I used to do it by hand, or sometimes I use a typewriter, but now I do more dictating. I ramble, then I edit.

Then I send it out for reaction. It's sort of a Delphi technique; you interpret back to them. Sometimes it's successful, and sometimes not. If the idea is only mine, there's no way in the world it will be accepted. It has to be owned by the people who participated.

EL: How is that accomplished?

RANKIN: For one thing, you have to use some of their words. For another, you can't be so distant from the way things really are that your proposals are unrealistic. And you have to allow for flexibility. But the most important thing is inventing methods of getting inventions. I'm not interested in getting one more innovation into the schools; I'm interested in getting processes that keep people trying and evaluating for themselves.

Planning

EL: What's an example of that?

RANKIN: Our achievement program requires that every school have its own instructional plan, with goals and objectives, strategies, evaluation procedures, and so on. Some community people must be involved. The program has pretty wide support throughout the school system.

EL: Do you see all those plans?

RANKIN: No, the regional superintendents review the school plans. But every regional office and every department in the central office also has to have an annual plan. They list their goals for the year, the resources they'll need,

their evaluation system, what kinds of services they'll provide, who's responsible, and so on. Those plans get reviewed by the Plan Review Panel, which consists of the superintendent, his deputy, two regional superintendents, and me. We read the plans in advance, and then the planner comes in with his or her people and they make a presentation. There are a lot of questions and then agreement; it's kind of like a contract for the coming year.

EL: What are some things you and your staff are working on right now?

RANKIN: We're working on a high school proficiency program; we're evaluating the planning process—it's been in place for about four or five years, and it's time we took a look at it—and we're doing a study on successful schools.

EL: You say you're evaluating the planning process. Some people think goals and plans don't have much effect on what really happens in schools. Will you try to find out about that?

RANKIN: Well, I don't know. We'll probably just formalize finding out how to do the process better, so people can use it the way it ought to be used. The evaluation procedure I like best I learned from Chuck Boye, a professor at Wayne State University. He used to ask three simple things: keep, stop, and start. You know, what do you have that's working, that we ought to hang on to? What do you have that's unproductive, that we ought to get rid of? What's missing that needs to be added?

EL: You mentioned your proficiency program. Do you think the minimum competency movement is a good idea?

RANKIN: I would distinguish between minimum proficiency testing and competency-based education. In minimum proficiency testing, all you do is set standards that have to be met or you'll withhold something—promotion, or entrance to programs, or graduation. But competency-based education is a different matter. To me, competency-based education simply means you come clean with what the competency is: describe the domain clearly enough that all parties can see what it is. You now have direction not just for the tests but, much more importantly, you have direction for instruction.



Effective Schools

EL: You mentioned a study of effective schools.

RANKIN: It's based on interviews of principals who are judged to be most successful by their regional superintendents because their schools have improved achievement and good leadership.

EL: What are you learning?

RANKIN: Effective urban principals confront every problem. It doesn't seem to matter whether a problem is staff motivation, parent concerns, instruction, pupil behavior, or anything else. They are willing to deal with it.

Secondly, we found that they use whatever programs and resources are available from whatever source. They may complain about having to implement a million different programs, but somehow they do it and manage to coordinate them. They make scarce resources go a long way.

Thirdly, interpersonal relationships are sound. The place is human and pleasant; and students, staff, and parents are all treated as important people. The principal

communicates high expectations of everyone.

Finally, the school is organized well. There is some form of systematic instruction in fundamental skills. Objectives are clear to students, staff, and parents. Everyone seems to understand the school's priorities, whatever they may be.

In other words, our study agrees pretty well with recent major studies by Brookover¹ and Edmonds (page 15).

EL: There is a growing feeling that most schools are not as effective as they should be. What's your impression?

RANKIN: I like the way Ralph Tyler answers that question. Given the task we've set for ourselves, American schools are doing a lot. I'm a long, long way from being satisfied; I wouldn't want to give any other impression. But when you increase the population that's going to school until everybody's going, when you decide you're not just going to put the assignments on the board and check the papers, but you're really going to take responsibility for

making sure that students learn, you're taking on quite a different task. I believe that most teachers are working hard, but they need more help.

EL: You seem to be proud of what schools are trying to do, but concerned that they're not altogether successful.

RANKIN: John Gardner said it in a speech about ten years ago.²

His point was that our institutions are caught in a scrap between the uncritical lovers, people who can make it in the institutions as they are and don't want them to change, and the unloving critics, who want to tear them down. I agree with him that we need people who are critical lovers: people who recognize that the world needs institutions, but that those institutions must keep changing and improving; that they must be responsive.

¹ W. B. Brookover and L. W. Lezotte. *Changes in School Characteristics Coincident with Changes in Student Achievement*. East Lansing: Michigan State University, College of Urban Development, 1977.

² John Gardner. "Uncritical Lovers, Unloving Critics." Speech given at Cornell University, June 1, 1968.

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