What Are School Priorities?
A Public Survey
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Surveys show that health, societal responsibility, and self-esteem are considered even more important than basic skills.

Given a choice, people will overwhelmingly identify reading, writing, and arithmetic— the basics — as the number one priority of the schools. Right? Wrong! Surveys conducted in Pennsylvania that included specific definitions of goals show that both educators and community groups support a broader mission for public education.

Pennsylvania’s Goals

Pennsylvania’s Goals of Quality Education are not unlike the goals of many other states or the Seven Cardinal Principles of Education and the Ten Imperative Needs of Youth of a half-century ago. They are single statement goals that are generally referred to as:

- Self-esteem
- Understanding differing others
- Basic skills: verbal skills; mathematics skills
- Interest in school and learning
- Societal responsibility
- Health
- Creative activities
- Career awareness
- Appreciation of human accomplishments
- Coping with change

A local school district embarking on a curriculum improvement process first conducts a needs assessment activity. This generally involves collecting both quantitative data on student performance, and information from the community and the students related to their perception of the mission of their schools.

Surveys asking for only a rank ordering of the goals of education using the goal statements or descriptors like the ten previously listed will generally produce “basic skills” as the top priority of the schools. However, if each of the goal statements or descriptors is replaced by a set of four specific goal-related objectives, the picture changes. For example, the self-esteem goal statement is:

Quality education should help every child acquire the greatest possible understanding of himself or herself and appreciation of his or her worthiness as a member of society.

This goal has been translated into a state assessment instrument by further defining self-esteem into four components prior to item development. The components are:

2. Feeling of control over the environment: belief that success in school and work depends upon effort, not luck.
3. Relationships with others: perceived ease in making and keeping friends and feelings of acceptance by others.
4. Self-image in school: feeling of success in schoolwork, class recitation, and teacher relationships.

From these four components, the objectives listed below were de-
veloped as part of a survey device to obtain community involvement in setting school priorities.

How important do you believe it is that the student:

1. Shows determination and self-worth; has a good opinion of self.

2. Believes that success is dependent upon effort; that things well planned generally work out.

3. Demonstrates ease in making friends; able to mix well with others.

4. Has a feeling of success in schoolwork; enjoys being called on in class.

A similar procedure was used for the remaining goals. The basic skill goal was divided into a verbal goal and a mathematics goal, as in the Pennsylvania state assessment package. The result was a 44-card Q-sort survey instrument (later changed to a more traditional survey format) that could be used with both educators and noneducators to determine their view of the role of the schools.

Results of the Survey

A wide variety of groups responded to the survey instrument. Figure 1 contains the final priority rankings for eight of the groups.

Self-esteem, interest in school and learning and societal responsibility are ranked no lower than fourth by five of the eight groups, while only two groups had a basic skill, verbal or mathematics, ranked in the top four positions. Interestingly, the high school juniors and seniors considered health habits and career awareness as the highest priority areas.

The ranking of the mathematics goal was depressed primarily by the student objective related to geometry. Respondents felt the three mathematics objectives concerning accuracy in computation, interpreting graphs and charts (as appearing in newspapers, for example), and problem-solving skills were important, but that geometric concepts were not very important. Geometry is part of the basic skills rationale, part of the assessment instrument, and a major part of the mathematics curriculum in most schools, but to many people it is not very important.

The two lowest ranked goals, appreciation of human accomplishments and creative activities, are consistent across groups. It is important to note that creative activities involves giving students the opportunity to become involved in activities that might be creative, such as painting a picture, acting in a play, or writing an article. It does not involve any qualitative measure of these activities.

In summary, it appears that there is considerable support for students learning the "basics." However, there is even greater support for students becoming good citizens, having a good self-image, being self-confident, and exhibiting proper health habits. It is not an either/or situation.

A survey instrument such as the one described in this paper can become a catalyst for community involvement. It can clarify the mission of the schools for both the school and the community and help guide subsequent curriculum decisions.

Figure 1. Priority Assigned to Goals of Education

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<th>Societal Responsibility</th>
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<th>High School</th>
<th>Shoppers at Shopping Mall</th>
<th>Women's Club</th>
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