Accountability—Doing What We Say

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Schools in Minnesota have set broad goals but give most time and attention to basic skills.

Accountability requires a direct relationship between a school's stated goals and the curriculum and the achievement tests administered. In order to have congruence between these elements—what we teach and evaluate and what we say we are going to teach and evaluate—we must use systematic planning procedures that recognize this critical relationship. Is this planning happening?

We compiled the responses of 96 questionnaires from 200 schools representing a geographically stratified random sample of schools in Minnesota. The questionnaires asked for (1) district goals, (2) commercial programs in use, (3) daily/weekly schedules showing how children's time is spent in grades one through six, and (4) what standardized tests are presently used in all grades.

The results were:

**Goals.** Less than 50 percent of the schools indicated they had an established set of goals and 75 percent of those having goals used all or a variation of the Phi Delta Kappa goals. There was little evidence of relating subject goals to overall district goals or of attempts to show the vertical relationship of subject goals to grade levels.

**Programs.** Reading and mathematics programs were purchased in all school districts for grades one through six. Social studies, language, and science programs were purchased in 99, 92, and 87 percent of the sixth grades. But in the first grades their purchase rates were 74, 68, and 67 percent, showing obvious vertical imbalance.

**Daily/Weekly Schedules.** Formalized reading and mathematics together take up 35 to 50 percent of the daily schedule from grades one through six. Spelling and handwriting skills account for another 6 to 10 percent. Social studies receives 5 percent of first grade time increasing to 13 percent in sixth grade. Science never receives more than 8 percent of the daily/weekly time at any grade level. The small remaining time is for the arts, literature, and individual contact.

**Testing.** Not all schools reported using standardized achievement tests at all grade levels. For those administering achievement tests the majority of the tests were in reading, mathematics, and language.

Thus, our study reveals a contradiction. Educators talk about broad goals but set subtle priorities when purchasing curriculum materials to accomplish those goals. Daily/weekly time schedules reflect deviation from comprehensive goals and concentration on formalized skill development. Testing, when carried out, suggests a concern for accountability in only the basic skill areas.

Perhaps the most important implications of our study revolve around the nature of education itself: What will we teach? When will we teach it? How will we know we are accomplishing it? Why is there such a lack of articulation in our education programs? Is the contradiction by design or by chance? In short, who's responsible for making decisions resulting in educational programs not in accordance with specified goals?