Overheard at a recent convention:
Superintendent 1: "They expect us to do everything. But we just can't."
Superintendent 2: "Not with declining enrollments and frozen budgets. It gets worse by the month."
Superintendent 3: "How can the schools make up for single-parent homes, violence on TV, and socioeconomic inequality all at once? But I know they expect us to!"

No, they don't. At least, not in three districts we know about where superintendents have polled their communities to find out what the schools should be teaching. These districts are a microcosm of mid-America: a large, rural district in northern Minnesota; a small, suburban district in southern Wisconsin; and a major city in western Ohio. They don't speak for all communities, of course, but perhaps they speak for yours.

Each district polled community residents, recent high school graduates, current high school students, and school staffs to find out what they believed should be priority graduation requirements for the 80s. Figure 1 combines the things everyone thought were so important that students shouldn't receive their high school diplomas if they hadn't learned each one of them by June of their senior year. Are these your priorities for the 80s? If you're not sure, maybe it's time to find out.

How Not To Find Out
Lots of survey instruments are available for polling community residents and others about what schools should be teaching, but many have flaws that make them troublesome—if not dangerous—to use. Here are some of the flaws to watch out for:

- Learning goals hopelessly scrambled together with teaching processes, school operations, and indicators of school climate, resulting in a disorganized ballot on which spelling, individualized instruction, transportation services, and school discipline are unknowingly put in competition with each other.
School districts may be surprised if, rather than asking people what students should learn, they ask what schools should teach.

- Learning goals too abstract to guide curriculum decisions (who can set priorities among motherhood, apple pie, and the flag?)
- Learning goals offered at different levels of abstraction so that some items accidentally overlap or contain others (how can you put knows American history on the same


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Figure 1. Responses to Priority Graduation Requirements for the 80s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graduation Requirements</th>
<th>Average Percent of Respondents Selecting Each Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computes accurately (adds, subtracts, multiplies, and divides)</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows the fundamentals of mathematics</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads with understanding</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writes correctly (proper grammar, punctuation, and capitalization)</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solves mathematical problems in practical situations</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaks correctly</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spells correctly</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reads to learn</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writes in a clear and organized fashion</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can follow written and oral directions</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows American history</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believes in having good mathematical skills</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows basic facts and principles of biology</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning goals not representative enough to cover all life areas or all school subjects so that some key areas of learning may be totally ignored

- Learning goals written only for the head and not for the heart or the hand, leading to a knowledge-heavy and attitudes/skills-light curriculum
- Learning goals only ranked but never ranked so that all goals could end up equally important and no priorities could be set
- Learning goals chosen for their importance for students to learn rather than for their importance for schools to teach so that the schools erroneously try to meet all learning needs of the students.

Flaws like these lead to the complaint about goal surveys that administrators make most often: “We did a goal survey of the community, but we can’t interpret the data. What do we do now?”

Throw it out. When the instrument is murky, so are the results.

How To Find Out

Trying to avoid these flaws, we created four questionnaires containing over 250 specific learning goals for the graduating senior. The goals touch 13 school subjects and 11 life areas—basic skills, citizenship, fine arts, jobs and careers, self-understanding, and so on. The goals are 60 percent cognitive, 30 percent affective, and 10 percent psychomotor.

Here is another sample (you’ve already seen the 13 winners):

- Knows what taxes pay for
- Appreciates what different races, religions, and nationalities have contributed to American life
- Obey traffic regulations
- Wants to take music, dance, drama, or art lessons
- Can understand common legal documents, such as loan agreements, leases, and wills
- Accepts responsibility for personal behavior
- Knows the effects of alcohol and tobacco
- Invents new approaches to difficult problems
- Plays on sports teams for recreation
- Prefers to live in a racially integrated community
- Plans to get training after high school to improve vocational skills
- Can read and interpret literature in a second language

For each of the over 250 goals, respondents decide how important it is for students to learn, how important it is for schools to teach, and whether it is so important that it should be required for high school graduation. The individual goals are then clustered into the school subjects and life areas for further analysis.

To validate the individual goal and cluster ratings, the respondents are also asked to allocate an imaginary $1,000 among the 11 life areas that directly compete with one another.

“If your survey does not make the distinction between importance to learn and importance to teach, your schools may wind up trying to put your eggs in too many baskets.”

Just like in real life. The spending pattern shows what people think should be emphasized in the school curriculum when they can’t have everything they might like.

People hate this spending game. They return questionnaires with a lot of erasures. They run out of money before they get to the bottom of the list and have to start over. When we do the survey in group interviews, somebody always says, “Can I have some more money? This isn’t enough.” And we always answer, “Not unless you want your taxes raised. These are the same choices your board of education and administrators have to make every day.”

But when community residents, recent graduates, students, and school staffs have to choose, they do . . . and they are very clear about what they want.

What You Will Find Out . . .

Probably

You will probably find out that the four populations generally agree with each other on what is important and what isn’t. None of the three districts faced a situation where the school staff disagreed much with the community or the students disagreed much with their parents or teachers—lucky for those superintendents.

The three districts also agreed with each other on several high and low priorities:

What Is Important? Basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, and mathematics), job skills, and thinking skills are most important for schools to teach—especially basic skills. People spend three times as much money on basic skills as on anything else—about $300 of $1,000. Job skills, allocated $100, come in second. That’s 40 percent of the money on just two of the 11 life areas!

Recent results also show that mathematics could be replacing English as the most important subject in the curriculum. Perhaps it is the technological age. Perhaps parents feel less able to help their children with math and want the schools to take greater responsibility for it. But, if you ask a room full of administrators and board members what the most important subject in the curriculum is, most will say reading. Are they just out of touch?

What Is Important To Learn But Not To Teach? Values and ethics, human relations, and self-understanding are important for the students to learn, although they are not so important for schools to teach—especially values and ethics.

People believe that while the community and schools can and should cooperate, the schools are primarily responsible for intellectual development, and the community is primarily responsible for character development. Most significantly, the schools cannot teach values and ethics instead of the three R’s. At least, the community wants the evidence of success in the three R’s first.

If your survey does not make the distinction between importance to learn and importance to teach, your schools may wind up trying to put your eggs in too many baskets.

What Is Not Important? Among the life areas, the physical environment (ecology, for example), recrea-
Educa7onal Leadership

often selected by a majority of the community residents, recent gradu-

ations? L

guage enrollment survey conducted which shows that only 18 percent of a foreign language.

for foreign languages is accurately reflected in the recent foreign lan-

culm program, they would be extremely upset, but most others in your schools and community would go along with you.

Keeping company with art and music at the bottom of the heap are foreign languages. This low priority for foreign languages is accurately reflected in the recent foreign lan-
guage enrollment survey conducted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, which shows that only 18 percent of secondary school students ever study a foreign language.

What About the Graduation Requirements? Let's look back at the 13 graduation requirements most often selected by a majority of the community residents, recent gradu-

ates, students, and school staffs. Here are some final points about the list of winners:

1. People are very discriminating. They choose fewer than 10 percent of the goals as graduation require-

ments.

2. About seven of ten chosen goals are basic skills, thus confirming their preeminence in the curriculum.

3. Three of the top five chosen are mathematics, and the only affective goal chosen is mathematics, thus subst-

antiating the lead mathematics seems to be establishing in the curriculum horse race. 

Computes accurately was number one in all three districts. In one district, 98 percent of the community residents selected it, and the other 2 percent must have put their pencils in the wrong place!

4. Very few citizenship/social studies goals are ever selected, yet folk wisdom and tradition would indicate that educating children to become good citizens in a democratic society is a fundamental part of American education. Perhaps as social studies broadened its offerings from history and geography to include more and more social science disciplines, it became less and less fundamental to education.

5. Science goals are the least often picked of any goals in the four basic academic subjects. What does that say for our chances of winning the accelerating race for technological superiority?

6. A striking pattern in the graduation requirements is that fundamentals are more important than appli-

cations which are more important than refinements. For example, knows the fundamentals of mathematics gets 95 percent of the vote, while solves mathematical problems in practical situations gets only 80 percent—fundamentals first, applications second.

What You Won't Find Out . . .

Probably

Some results differ from district to district, of course. For example, you won't find that vocational education is always ranked in the same place in the list of school subjects. It was ranked higher in the urban district than in the suburban and rural ones. Perhaps vocational education is seen as most critical for students in districts with the greatest unemployment problems.

If you plan to use survey results to fine tune your curriculum, you won't want to rely on results, even the common ones, from other districts. Even when the trends are the same, the degree of support for basic skills or lack of support for the fine arts differs by district. That degree of difference can make all the difference in whether your program cuts will be accepted in your community. Your constituents will have their own views about that, and you can find out only by asking them.

Acting on the Results

We have called the results of the survey the curriculum marching orders for the districts, and they have tried hard to follow them. Where the administrators agreed with the community, graduates, students, and staffs, they cut some programs teaching what was least important and expanded some programs teaching what was most important. Sometimes where the administrators disagreed, they changed people's minds and led everyone in a new direction. For instance, two districts developed and published new sets of K-12 curricu-

lum objectives in all school subjects. One of these districts went on to develop entire curriculum guides; another is now picking new teaching materials and working on an evaluation system to match the objectives. One district doubled class time in language arts in the elementary schools from 25 to 50 minutes per day. And another district got rid of driver education without any community, student, or staff uproar.

But should administrators lead even if the community doesn't want to follow? Should they use their professional training and experience to provide an education that is better for students than laypersons could design? One district boosted foreign language enrollment significantly over two years (thanks to an extensive public awareness campaign) after foreign languages received low ratings. That district had to work hard to change people's minds. Should you do that? These questions are often asked. Here is one answer:

It's up to you whether you want to lead in the face of community opposition. But, we think you should at least know how many people will be around to saw off the limb once you get out on it.