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We May Not Make Policy, But We Can Influence It

During the summer I led a three-day workshop at the University of Montana to review the flood of national reports. After comparing the recommendations of the various panels, boards, and commissions with the observations of John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and Ted Sizer, the participants came up with a recommendation of their own: change the way American schools are governed.

Desirable as that might be, it won't happen, right away—at least not in the way those teachers and principals had in mind. They wanted more discretion for themselves, but the trend is to centralize decisions at the state level. A good many governors, legislators, and other state officials have concluded that they cannot wait for local districts to decide what kind of schools they want. They are demanding action and, with an eye on the ballot box, are taking the reins themselves.

As usual, California is out in front. Joseph Murphy and his co-authors (p. 20) say the California Department of Education intends to standardize curriculum content, time allocations, textbooks, and testing in all state schools. The advantages of doing so are clear: efficiency, supportability, and equity of a sort. The disadvantages are equally evident, including the danger that teachers and principals will feel less responsible for the educational welfare of their students. Perhaps that won't happen—it depends on the flexibility of the new policies and on how sensitively they are administered—but the signs are not auspicious. As a California principal said at a recent ASCD meeting, "It's all right to say school people should quit reacting and start showing leadership, but the truth is I've done nothing but react for the last two years, and I don't see any way to change it."

When Governor Lamar Alexander told a group of Tennessee administrators last spring that he wished he had

their power to improve schools, some remarked privately that he was talking nonsense. Alexander meant only that the quality of education is ultimately determined by the actions and decisions of individual teachers, principals, and superintendents; but Tennessee educators are too busy these days coping with the governor's new career ladder program to initiate improvements themselves.

What can we do to take charge of our own profession? Not much, aside from vigorously pointing out to politicians and the general public the folly of blaming educators for the results of policies adopted over their objections.

Even though most important policy decisions will continue to be made by others, however, local educators need not abandon hope of influencing those decisions. Policy analysis involves predicting the short- and long-term consequences of various actions. We cannot know precisely what the effects of a policy will be, but we can report what has happened under similar circumstances in the past and, on the basis of available data and our own experience, project what is likely to happen. Legislators, school board members, and other officials may seem arrogant or shortsighted, but most hold public office because they sincerely want to make things better. They are hungry for information, provided it is accurate and concise.

We may wish that we could set education policy ourselves, and we may think it would be more coherent and productive if we did. Since we are destined to be governed by others, we had better try to help them make wise decisions. □



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