



# Guidelines for Effective Education Policies

RICHARD J. DEASY

Americans are a people of paradox. We are constantly about the business of balancing competing interests: the rights and perspectives of the individual with the needs and demands of society, the values of subcultures with those of the nation as a whole. *E pluribus unum.*

Remembering this underlying tension provides a framework for examining our social institutions and analyzing the struggle to set sensible policies for them. It also points up the essentially political character of public policy making. Competing interests must be served and ultimately brought into balance if the institution is to remain viable. And the public must believe that the balance responds to its interests.

So, certainly, with schools. The fundamental purpose of educational policy is to create, nurture, and sustain those contexts in which students can best learn and teachers best teach. But consider at least two sets of competing interests. The first arises from what we know about learning and teaching; namely, that we learn to write differently from the way we learn the chemistry of cells, that learners can and will use different strategies to solve problems, that the methods and skills of particular teachers are of more help to some students than to others. Such convictions pull us toward individualization and differentiation.

Enter the institutional imperatives. Scheduling, monitoring, and moving groups of students is more efficient than dealing with individual cases. In a

single classroom, a teacher must orchestrate hundreds of actions into a harmonious and effective whole—a complex management challenge. The effective school has an ethos of shared values and common goals pursued by the faculty and the principal. Such factors press us toward general rules, uniform structures, consistent treatment.

Both sets of interests are legitimate. Keeping them in dynamic rather than destructive tension is the game of the educational policymaker. It is a difficult game in its own right, but it is also a game played before active spectators. Our decisions are political acts, attempts to balance competing interests within the school by considering the current balances being struck in the society without. A public institution too much out of line with that external balance will either be realigned by social pressure or abandoned.

**The delicate balancing act of setting educational policies requires a common vision, collaboration, assessment, and time.**

*Richard J. Deasy is Assistant State Superintendent for Instruction, Maryland State Department of Education, Baltimore.*



## A Balancing Act

A hopeful reading of the current spate of reports and recommendations is that society has undertaken a reshaping of the schools. If this is true, the outcome will be healthy. Educators will get some clear and useful messages on how the public would like the schools to be run.

A darker interpretation is that there is no public, that the social fabric itself is rent and the pressures on the schools are coming from articulate and powerful groups expressing their own limited interests. If that is true, the system of public education is at risk. At best it will be fragmented to serve the various constituencies. At worst it will be abandoned as useless.

Given these conflicting possibilities, educational policymakers may well ply their trade cautiously. Consider, as an example, the call for a core of learning for all high school students. Some proponents of a core argue that such a policy would be socially useful: that students would be bound together in common study and thereby prepared to function better as citizens. These proponents also see the core as an effective way to help students manage their time: students would have fewer and, therefore, more manageable choices. Such arguments are valid. But they are appeals to the role and values of the school as a social institution. They require only modest change in school organization, primarily simplification. They give rise to modest curriculum proposals: the core as a limited set of traditional courses.

Other proponents—Ted Sizer, for instance—propose a more radical formulation of the core. Traditional courses would be set aside, and teaching and learning would focus on clusters of knowledge and skill. Such proposals would require significant changes in school organization. I think it unlikely in the current political climate that these proposals will be adopted. The school would be destabilized while the new organization was being introduced, tested, and institutionalized. It is safer and perhaps wiser, in view of the public ambiguity, to proceed with caution.

The balance likely to be struck will speak of a core of learning (which has become public, and therefore political, language) but will define the core

**“The balance likely to be struck will speak of a core of learning . . . but will define the core as a set of traditional courses.”**

as a set of traditional courses. It remains to be seen whether such a policy will produce either the social values promised or will lead to improvements in student learning. Significant gains, if any, are more likely to be seen in institutional terms: a simplification and stabilization of the school. Other policies will be needed to address improved student learning.

## A Dynamic Tension

If I am correct that setting educational policy is a matter of balancing competing interests with an eye toward political conditions, how can we proceed in a way that will produce dynamic rather than destructive tension in the school? I propose the following guidelines.

First, each policy must be justified in terms of a comprehensive view of the school. I am currently chairing the Maryland Commission on Secondary Education, a three-year effort to set new policies for state public high schools. Our first six months were spent in formulating a statement of the school's mission. Hammering it out was an essential activity of the Commission since it exposed the pluralism of our views and forced us to state a common vision. It made public our balancing act. No single policy or point of view will be the magic solution to school improvement.

Second, the shaping of a policy and, without question, its implementation should be collaborative. Participation by those who will be affected is not just politically necessary; it also gives them ownership of the decision and mobilizes rather than frustrates their

energy. It is dynamic rather than destructive. There is another reason. Educators are already using all of the time available to them. A new policy is a decision to reallocate that time, remold behavior, and alter the web of relationships in the school. Policymakers need insight into the consequences of such changes. What will *not* be done as a result of the new policy? (After all, art and music are not mysteriously disappearing from schools: other policy decisions are forcing them out.) We have tried to be collaborative in our work in Maryland, not only in the composition of the Commission and its five task forces but in establishing field site schools that are routinely visited for reality checks on tentative policy recommendations. Listening thoughtfully to the affected parties not only will avoid political mistakes but will prevent superficial policy decisions.

Third, we must state what will count as success if a policy is implemented. If we truly expect improved student learning, we need to address assessment issues as a part of policy development. If we are willing to count as success lower dropout rates, better course selections, or higher participation in co-curricular activities, then these should be measured. Data should be collected over time to determine if the policy is useful. I favor collecting data on a number of variables, since, to pursue my theme, we must not be content with narrow outcomes. We also need to know what we are losing in exchange for the gains.

Finally, we should say how much we are willing to commit to implementation of the policy. Changing behavior, and particularly behavior in social institutions, requires time. We must acknowledge this and speak in terms of five to ten years. It is especially important for state level policymakers to allot such time so that local schools are buffered from ephemeral political winds as they work through the systematic processes needed to make schools and classrooms improve.

To pretend that quick changes can be made is unfair to schools and deceives the public into setting unreal expectations. Both are serious mistakes in the difficult game of setting education policy. Amid the paradoxes of American life, make haste slowly. □

Copyright © 1984 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.