

A Stronger State Role in School Reform

School improvement efforts need not focus on the local school; decisions about curriculum content, textbooks, and testing should be made at the state level.

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Most authorities calling for school improvement take as gospel that such efforts should be centered at the school site level. Our own reading of the literature, however, convinces us that state governments should assume a strong and direct role in promoting educational reform, school effectiveness, and student achievement. We hope that this direction now being taken in California will influence policymakers in other states and will lead to fuller discussion about the proper roles for all segments of the educational system—state, region, district, school, and classroom.

Our recommendations are based primarily on the school effectiveness research (Bossert and others, 1981; Brookover and others, 1978; Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte and others, undated; and Purkey and Smith, 1982) and the educational reform literature (for example, Joyce and others, 1983; Task Force for Economic Growth, 1983; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1984). Unlike most of our colleagues, though, we contend that states should go beyond a facilitative and catalytic role to actively promote reform and to institutionalize the findings from effective schools.

Our position is based on three propositions. First, and most important, the school effectiveness and educational reform literature presents a realistic perspective for school improvement.

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Second, a number of assumptions implicit in the school improvement literature that argue against a strong state role are questionable. We treat these assumptions in detail elsewhere (Murphy, Hallinger, and Mesa, 1984). Here we can only note that neither our own work in the area of school effectiveness and instructional leadership nor our review of the work of others (Murphy and others, 1983a; 1983b; in press-a; in press-b; in press-c) provide strong support for the following assumptions that are being codified into school improvement efforts nationwide:

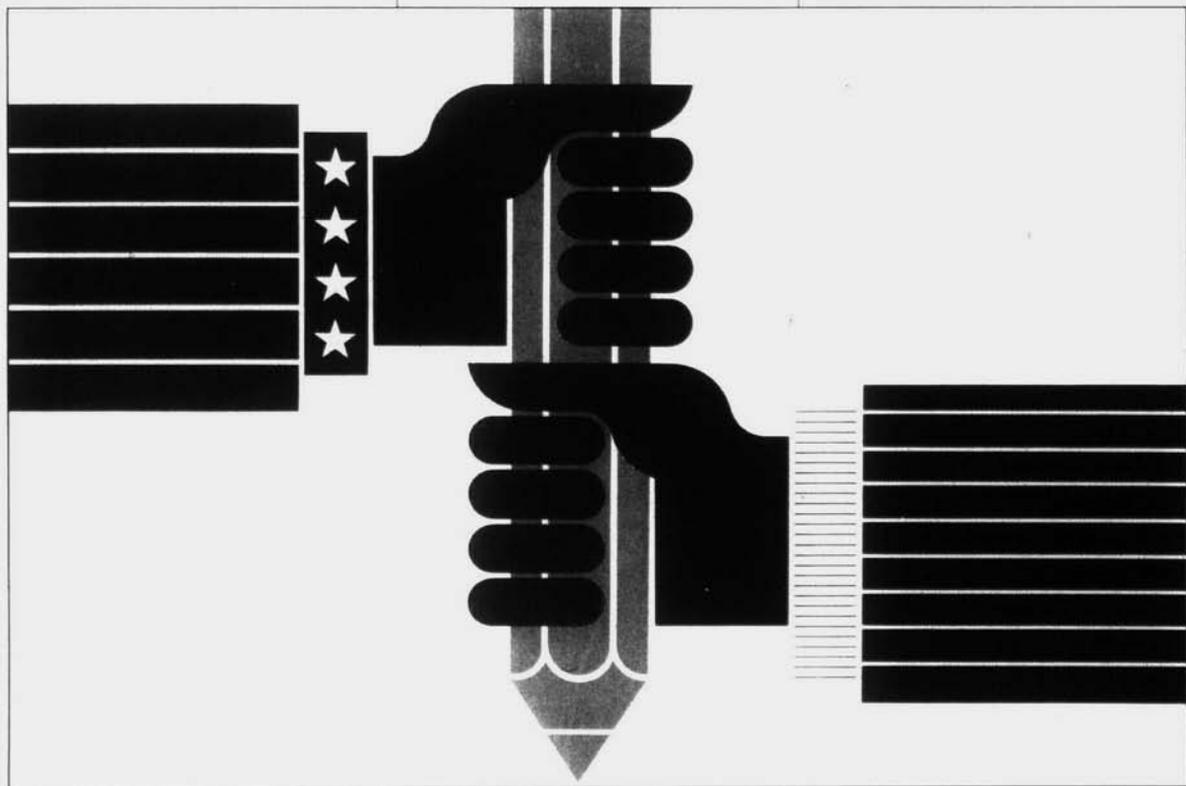
- School effectiveness is primarily a process (rather than content).
- Bottom-up change is the key to improvement (rather than top-down).
- The school is *the* appropriate locus of educational reform (rather than the classroom, the district, the state).
- Effectiveness findings from individual schools can best be institutionalized if replicated directly at other schools (rather than analyzing the con-

tent and assigning activity on that content to the most appropriate level, such as district or state).

- School improvement is primarily a matter of improving the culture of a school (rather than the technology).

- Schools are necessarily loosely coupled (rather than tightly connected), and therefore state policy directives are not likely to have much impact at other levels of the system.

Our final proposition is that a new definition of educational equity for students is in the making. As Goodlad (1984) has pointed out, this new definition pushes us beyond issues of financial parity and into considerations of access to knowledge. The same type of expansive role that accrued to states when issues of financial equity were handled will and should accrue to states in the areas of educational technology (curriculum, instruction, and learning environment) as we set out to reach this newly defined goal.



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Changing the Philosophy and Operation of State Departments Themselves

State departments of education must begin by putting their own houses in order. This involves enacting changes in three major structural and policy areas: shifting resources toward curriculum and instruction, reducing the emphasis on compliance, and designing programs that focus on districts and schools as whole systems.

Connections between state departments of education and local districts and schools are weak and are often centered around activities unrelated to curriculum and instruction. Most emphasize activities of secondary importance, such as narrow categorical programs and compliance with state regulations. These digressions from instructional and curricular matters tap an inappropriately large share of a state's reform resources. In California, for example, prior to 1984 only a handful of professional educators in the state education department were assigned to curricular areas, while hundreds were involved with a wide range of categorical programs.

If states are to promote education reform, they must begin to deal with content and not simply with organizational matters. For example, communications between states and local districts and schools on textbook selection should focus on what is in the books and the instructional methodology to convey it rather than on book purchasing and warehousing.

New ways of looking at the curriculums of categorical programs are needed. As matters stand, the content of many programs is not derived from the same objectives as the regular school program; they should be better integrated with and more supportive of the core curriculum.

In addition to rethinking the content of categorical programs, state legislatures and departments of education need to reexamine the amount of resources they have committed to ensuring compliance. In many states compliance has in effect become its own industry, reinforcing the isolation of categorical programs from one another and from the mainstream program. We do not propose to eliminate compliance efforts, but we do advocate reviewing and substantially reducing

the resources now devoted to them. In California, substantial sums were redirected to curriculum work when the compliance units of the various categorical programs were integrated and moved from the school to the district level.

Underlying the move to integrate core and categorical programs is a major theme that deserves further elaboration. Specifically, a finding of paramount importance from the school effectiveness and reform movements is the power possessed by an entire system working together to promote change. An entire school or district with commonly understood goals, consistently high expectations, whole-group inservice activities and curriculum development, and schoolwide beliefs and rules can have an effect greater than the sum of the efforts, activities, and staff involved.

Unfortunately, emphasis on categorical programs robs the state of its opportunities to take advantage of this gestalt effect. We recommend a shift from isolated programs for various groups of targeted students to serving these students through schoolwide programs. States should also allow more flexibility in use of personnel, material resources, and money as districts and schools set about developing such programs.

The Facilitative Role: Supporting School Reform Efforts

A major function of states is to provide direct support for organized school reform. Two areas now being emphasized in California are promotion of research and improvement efforts and the provision of recognition and incentives. These activities appear especially fruitful for duplication by other states.

State governments can enhance the effectiveness of school improvement efforts and research in two major ways. First, as Mackenzie (1983) and Purkey and Smith (1983a) have noted, there is a real need for reviewing the ever-increasing number of school effectiveness research and implementation efforts and for disseminating information about these programs. Second, based on this clearinghouse function, state governments can fund additional research, especially to test findings and

expand the scope of previous studies. For instance, research can establish whether similar results are obtained at different types of schools (suburban, rural) and different levels of schooling (junior and senior high schools), and can assess the effects of particular practices on various outcomes (student self-concept, organizational health, and so on).

States can also provide more support to districts and schools through recognition and incentive programs. Farrar and her colleagues (1983) point out that states are in an especially favorable position to spread information about effective schools programs. Recognition programs not only provide a communications link, but also reward the districts and schools that are successfully working toward improvement (Wynne 1983a; 1983b). In California, a number of formal and informal methods for recognizing districts and schools ranging from award ceremonies to membership on committees were put in place during the last two years.

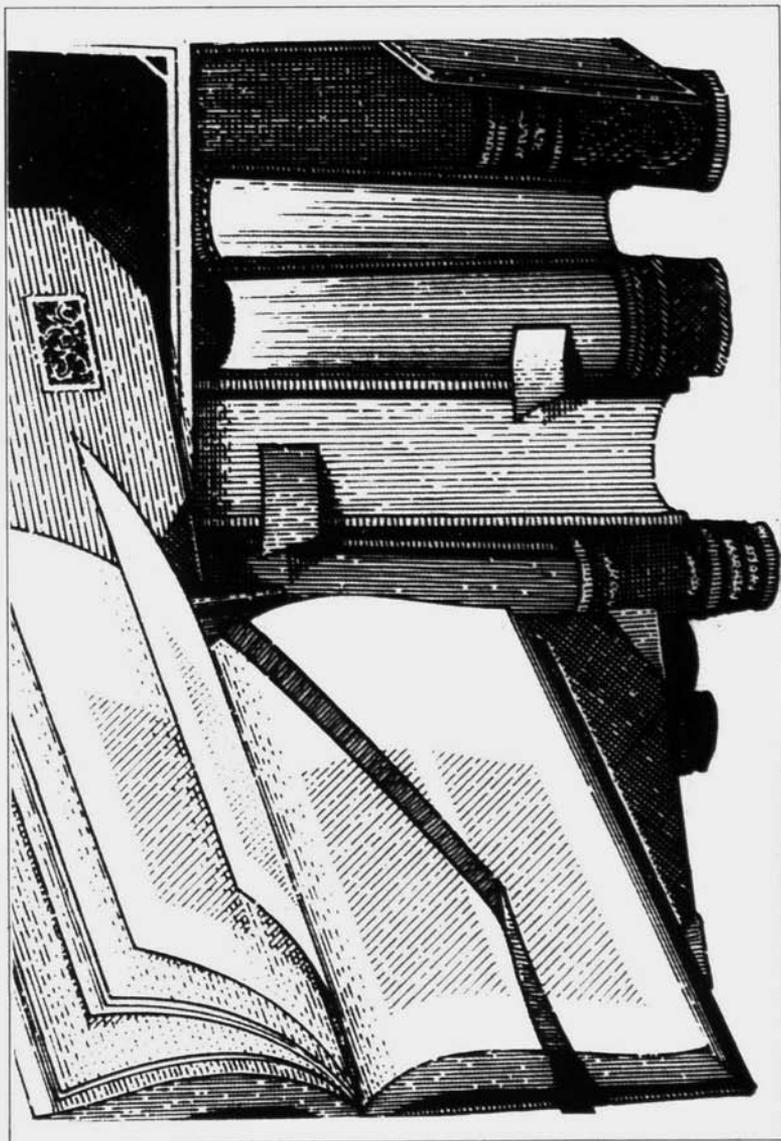
Another major incentive that states can offer is financial rewards for districts and schools that meet established objectives for student learning or that undertake improvement efforts based on the findings of research. California's School Improvement Program has been revised to encourage research-based improvement efforts; several alternatives for providing financial incentives for goal attainment are under consideration.

The Catalytic Role: Providing Technical Assistance

In order to ensure maximum movement toward educational reform and improvement, states must move beyond a merely supportive role. One important additional function is the development of technical assistance in the areas of district and school effectiveness. The primary role of state departments in this area is to translate what we know about the content and process of effective schools into high quality methods and materials that can be used by districts and schools as they set about their improvement efforts.

Such translation of findings is needed in the development of technically sound assessment instruments that fo-

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cus on known effectiveness indicators. A few states (Connecticut, Louisiana) have moved in this direction already. A state education department can also develop models for specific effectiveness factors, such as curriculum alignment or providing instructional leadership. The important element in these activities is not who does the actual development work but rather who develops the specifications that form the basis for quality control of products. State departments of education are uniquely positioned to set such standards.

The Active Role: Defining and Controlling Educational Content

States should also consider undertaking an even more active and direct

role in education reform. Specifically, from our experiences in California, we contend that states should take the lead in defining and controlling educational content. The ideal of educational equity cited earlier (Goodlad, 1984) suggests that a core body of knowledge is to be presented to all students. If this is to happen across all districts, the definition of that body of knowledge, skills, and competencies must occur at the state level. States should also establish clear expectations for schools in terms of both required allocations of time to all subjects at the elementary level and graduation requirements at the high school level.

We recognize that these structural changes—core curriculum and con-

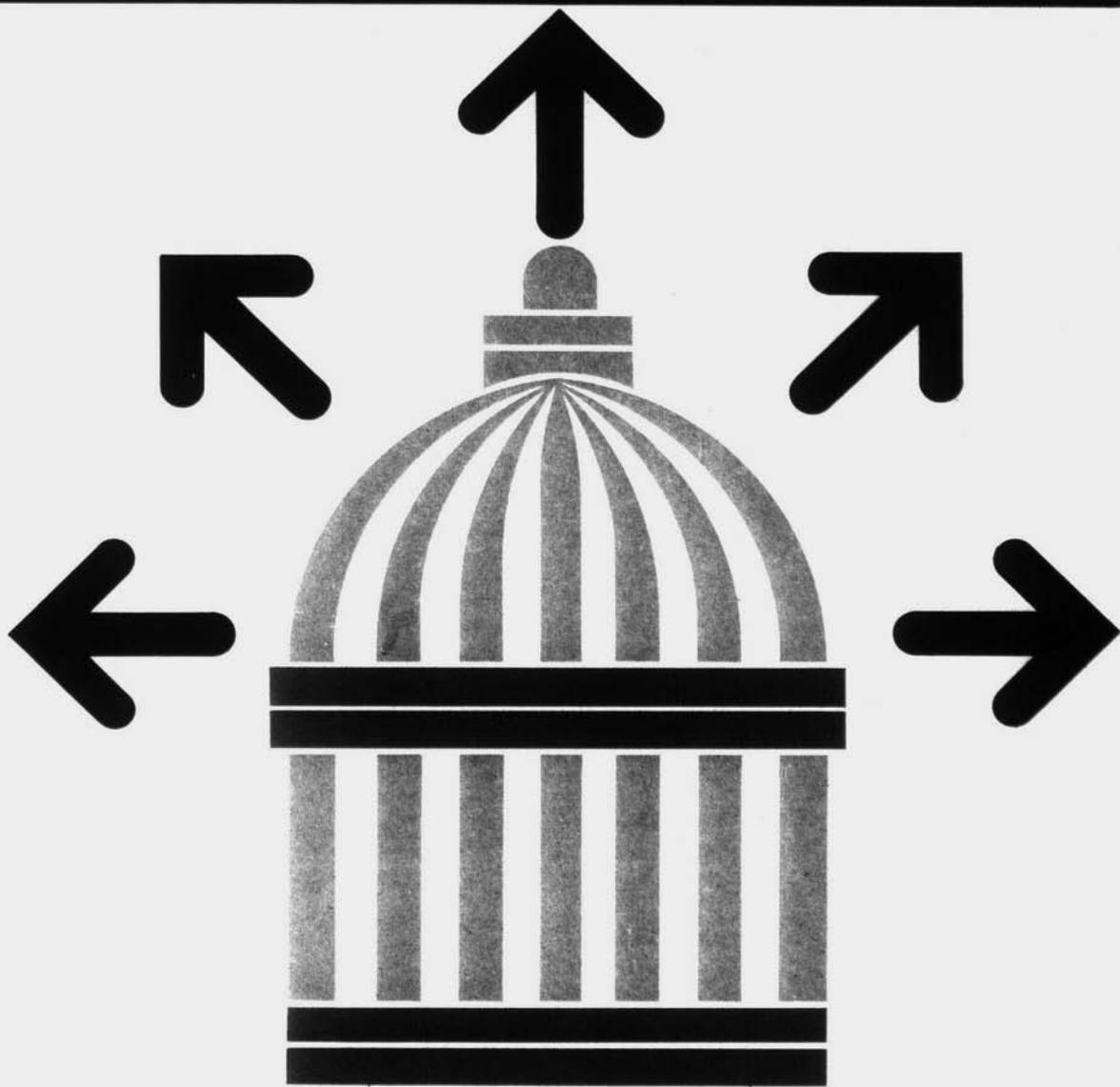
tent specifications, graduation requirements, required subject area time allocations—will not necessarily translate automatically into more student learning. However, such an enabling structure provides clear expectations for districts and schools, justification for local efforts at improvement, and the context for additional positive changes in curriculum, instruction, and learning environment.

In addition to taking the lead in defining educational content, the general control of that content logically belongs at the state level. If there is state-determined content, as we recommend, the alignment of curriculum materials and testing programs with that content can also be handled most readily at the state level. What this implies, contrary to some reform recommendations (Boyer, 1983, for example), is much more state control of instructional materials. It makes more sense for the state of California to review materials for alignment with curriculum requirements than it does to ask over 1000 districts to select from over 1300 state-approved textbooks.

Another logical outgrowth of state control over educational content is a strong state role in the area of student assessment. A large number of instruments are available to assess student performance, but many of these are not carefully matched with the curriculum objectives of districts and schools or with the content of regularly used textbooks. The direction that California has taken in testing sets a good model to rectify this discrepancy. Based on the statewide uniform content principle, a single uniform testing system is being developed. The uniform test system: (1) can be used by districts and schools in lieu of the usual standardized tests; (2) covers approved content in numerous areas not assessed on many existing tests, such as science, social studies, and writing; (3) focuses on both basic and higher order skills; and (4) provides both curriculum-valid diagnostic information for teachers and longitudinal information for district and school planning.

As a final controlling mechanism, we see an active role for states in assessing the outcomes of districts and schools. As we draw away from compliance, our attention must shift to

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holding districts and schools accountable for progress toward established goals and for the application of information about what makes classrooms, schools, and districts effective. States must therefore focus the attention of the educational community and the general public on the appropriate reform and effectiveness issues. California, for example, will release to the public a profile showing school progress on important outcomes (such as test scores, attendance, holding power) and effectiveness factors (such as homework, amount of writing, per-

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cent of students enrolled in higher level courses). During the past year California developed a formal review process for elementary schools to judge how well schools were meeting state-set educational goals and using up-to-date research conclusions. A review for secondary schools is being developed, and one for districts is in the early planning stages.

Ensuring School Reform

A number of misconceptions are becoming embedded in the school improvement literature. One of the most serious is overemphasis on the role of individual schools at the expense of district and state activity. Based on our understanding of effective schools and instructional leadership, and on our own work in California, we are firmly convinced that states can and should claim a significant and direct part in school improvement. □

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