

Formulating Education Policy in the Aftermath of the Reports

Educators must respond to public pressure for reform but must decide, based on local circumstances, what changes will lead to real improvement.

The policy crisis now confronting the schools is virtually without precedent. Confusion rages over what policies are essential and over the best means of their accomplishment. The unfolding drama is extraordinary because of several remarkable circumstances: the media has mounted a blistering attack on educational ineptness; political candidates at all levels have made schooling a major issue; the rising clout of teacher organizations has enabled them to exercise

unparalleled power; and policymaking itself, once arrived at by consensus, has become a free-for-all.

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The calls for reform that made 1983 notable raised a number of critical questions: What is the basic purpose of education? Should instruction follow its own rationale or bend toward the amelioration of national problems? Since the assorted recommendations aim at sharply different goals, even more fundamental issues arise. Did the reform reports carry hidden agendas? Were some intended indirectly to subvert existing programs?

Fundamental Considerations in Policy Construction

In view of these enigmas, one might well ask, what are educational policies? Who makes them? What functions do they serve? What happens when they are disregarded? Can the schools politely ignore the prescriptions of *A Nation at Risk* or the admonitions of the President?

Policies come in different shapes and forms, fulfill a variety of functions, and have diverse effects. Loosely defined, they can be viewed as resolutions, chosen by institutions or individuals from a range of options. Heavily influenced by existing problems, policies essentially serve as guides to action. They frequently specify as well the steps necessary for their implementation. Thus, *A Nation at Risk* argues that we no longer compete in world marketplaces as successfully as we once did and implies that different educational policies will restore our former preeminence. It then outlines changes that the new policies will necessitate.

The problems of schooling overlap other social conditions, largely be-

cause the educational, political, and economic systems intermesh. It is for this reason that educational reforms invariably have economic overtones.

Consider, for example, the language in the report of the Commission on Excellence. The title itself is instructive: not *Problems in Education* or *Improving Schools* but *A Nation at Risk*, which implies that educational weaknesses have endangered the republic. Indeed, the connection between schooling and a healthy economy is argued explicitly:

... Economists have shown in their research that education is one of the chief engines of a society's material well-being ... It is, therefore, essential ... for government at all levels to affirm its responsibility for nurturing the Nation's intellectual capital ... The citizen is dismayed at a steady 15-year decline in industrial productivity, as one great American industry after another falls to world competition!

Throughout the report one finds repeated reference to our decline in international repute and our mounting inability to compete successfully with other nations. The decline of our economy is seen as a national crisis, and the schools must therefore alter their ways.

The creeds of public institutions are not easily reversed, either. Tradition and policy often fulfill the same functions. The preoccupation with international competition illustrates that, as societal conditions shift, educational policies fluctuate between contradictory, but equally valued, beliefs. James and Tyack (1983) compare policies espoused in the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* with public sentiment 50 years later: The *Cardinal Principles* reflected both the general-

ized anxieties of the progressive era of the early 20th century and the extraordinary hope of a confident profession that schooling could ameliorate social ills. It was a classic statement of the possibility of a new form of social engineering—of creating deliberate and positive change through education. The report stressed "activities," "democracy," and "efficiency" and seemed to relegate traditional academic subjects and pedagogy to the scrap heap.

In the 1950s, however ... a variety of critics—academics, administrators, and an admiral—reviled the lackluster and anti-intellectual character of the high school. ... They attacked the low standards of academic performance in the schools, blaming the influence of progressive education—life adjustment, child-centered learning, and the like—for all the problems they saw eroding the excellence of American society. ... The solution, these reformers contended, was to place much greater emphasis on science, mathematics, foreign languages, and the traditional liberal arts. They wanted rigor, a demanding adult world of discipline, and high cognitive expectations for the otherwise dull and disorderly young of the nation.²

The criticism of the 1950s reads much like *A Nation at Risk*. Even rational policies rarely live beyond their time, first, because circumstances change; second, because the provisions do not in most cases entirely solve the difficulty to which they are addressed; and third, because the solution to one problem frequently generates some new complication. Our interest in educational equity, as a case in point, may have had negative side effects with respect to quality.

Purposes of Policies

What purposes do policies actually serve? Although they normally outline a plan of action, they also have other, more pointed, functions. These secondary aims are especially significant during times of rapid changeover, such as the one we are now experiencing. As Guba (this issue, p. 63) suggests, policies can be used to identify specific goals (develop critical thinking); to establish mandates (adjure districts to mainstream handicapped children); to provide guidelines when discretionary action is permissible (decide how to raise educational stan-

dards); to outline a problem-solving strategy (solicit greater parental involvement in children's education); to sanction behavior (delineate acceptable ways to isolate disruptive students); or to achieve consistency (stipulate that all high schools require four years of English).

All these uses are apparent in the ongoing state readjustments. California, Florida, and Tennessee are pursuing school improvement in disparate ways. Each has set its own agenda of priorities, its own procedures, and its own system of checks and balances. Other states have been somewhat more cautious.

Pitfalls in Policy Making

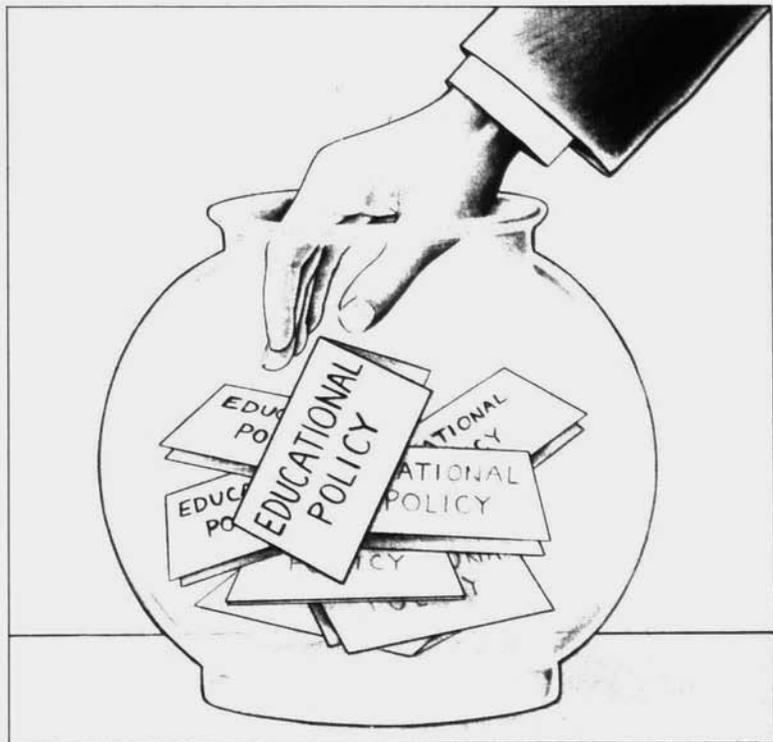
The times call for action of some sort, but what action?

The reform reports themselves suggest ends but not means, ignoring important considerations such as cost, the absence of consensus, and the everyday impediments schools face.

Schools have two major options: (1) initiate cosmetic alterations that create the illusion of change or (2) use the recommendations to work toward substantive improvements. The choice will depend on the extent to which local policymakers regard each particular recommendation as a legitimate basis for innovation.

As policy is formed, it will have to contend with the criticisms that have generated strong public desire for a more conservative brand of education. People are now deeply concerned about the quality of the nation's schools. The prevailing sentiment is that there must be a return to curricular basics, stronger discipline, higher standards, and measurable results. The citizenry is likely to favor politicians who promise more educational accountability, better use of money, and tangible improvement. The measuring yardstick, presumably, will be test scores. There are discordant longings in the criticisms; the preponderant feeling is that academic villainy must cease.

A counterpoint to the public pressure to change is that educators fear that the willy-nilly implementation of recommendations will produce harm-



ful side effects. It would be easy to manufacture an impression of excellence, but a thoughtless return to earlier errors and previous sins would only turn confusion into calamity. In addition, they fear that the recommendations could lead to a higher dropout rate, an unconscionable preoccupation with surface luster, the undermining of recent programs to increase educational equality, an emphasis on counterfeit curriculum goals, and, generally, the senseless misuse of limited resources. The problem then is to formulate policies that are responsive to the reforms, that produce authentic improvement, and that at the same time preserve the gains of the last two decades.

To gauge the impact of their formulations, policymakers must summon

visions of the future. If they conclude that the reports are saturated with old myths, they will try to get the public to consider reforms of a different sort from those currently being promoted. If they anticipate that the public will regain its senses, view good education as something more than test scores, and free schools from responsibility to build the competitive muscle of corporate business, they will allow many aspects of the reports to rest in peace. But if they are convinced that people accept the doctrine that schools are "one of the chief engines of a society's material well-being..." and that "education is the cornerstone" of our military capabilities (*A Nation At Risk* pp. 16-17, 17-18, respectively), the crisis of confidence will continue; and policymakers will need to seek ways of

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convincing the public that our economic and military shortfalls cannot be solved in the nation's classrooms.

This situation illustrates another principle: policies should not be based on unverified presumptions or empty shibboleths. For example, a great many school districts and even whole states, (see Murphy, Mesa, and Hallinger, p. 20) have sought to reorganize their instructional programs to make them congruent with the precepts of the effective schools research—but experience often offers more useful guidelines to improvement than conclusions from research. Rowan, Dwyer, and Bossert³ have warned against too hasty acceptance of the misbegotten findings from flawed studies.

In the aftermath of the reports, what is abundantly clear is that school improvement must be achieved through local policies. At best, criticism has mobilized public concern and identified failings. Problems can be outlined in general terms, but the hard core of the retrenchment must come from policies crafted in individual districts. In a sense, each school and each teacher must decide what changes would be sensible and what procedures will best bring them about.

Good policy depends upon two judgments: knowing what to do and knowing how to get it done. Timing is essential to success in both, for sound theory translated into policy at the wrong time is likely to have minimal effect.

The best way to begin is by selecting specific goals and devising corresponding tactics. Here, unfortunately, the reports were less informative than they could have been. While high-minded aims were advocated, little was said about *how* they should be accomplished. If we want greater dedication and higher performance from teachers, for example, merit pay may or may not be the best alternative. If we wish to perpetuate critical thinking skills, more homework could be useful but homework of what sort?

The greatest need at the moment is for policies that facilitate the achievement of specific objectives such as reducing discipline problems, increas-

ing parental reinforcement, and strengthening academic commitment. As such policies are developed and tested, they should be advertised broadly, if only to demonstrate the profession's good will. Then if impediments materialize, these too must be made known, both to justify the policy revisions that will follow and to make the public aware of obstacles encountered. Only in this way can we protect ourselves against unreal expectations, false indictments, and irrational regulations imposed by governing bodies.

The curatives advocated in the writings on school reform are provocative and often insightful, but decision makers must sift them through the filter of rationality and test them for truth in the light of practical experience. Compelling reasons to act must not be permitted to compel unreasonable action. The dark side of reality cannot be ignored; to sweep ideological debris under the curricular carpet will only increase disorder. □

¹David P. Gardner and others, *A Nation at Risk* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), pp. 17-18.

²James, and Tyack, "Learning From Past Efforts to Reform the High School," *Phi Delta Kappan* February 1983, pp. 400-407.

³Brian Rowan, David Dwyer, and Steven Bossert, "Research on Effective Schools: A Cautionary Note," *Educational Researcher*, 1983, pp. 25-30.

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