

Why the States Must Move Quickly to Assess Excellence

Unless improvements can be documented, policymakers and the public may lose interest in education.

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The public wants results! Public polls in Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Colorado have all indicated that the public is willing to pay more for education, provided there is indication of substantial improvement in quality.

State policymakers also want results. They have worked hard with various groups and individuals at state and local levels to design and enact reform measures. Now that many reforms have been enacted, they need to be able to document that the reforms and the money spent on them are achieving the desired results.

It is very likely that the current enthusiasm for reforming education represents a small "window of opportunity." Unless states can document

positive results within the next 18 to 24 months, there will be a kind of education backlash. Without proof that the reforms are working, state policymakers and public citizens alike may become disenchanted. Such disenchantment could lead to rollbacks of tax increases or, at the very least, a strong inclination to turn attention away from education. Public education is engaged in stiff fiscal competition with transportation, the environment, and the rebuilding of urban infrastructures. Education may lose unless states and localities can demonstrate that the new reform provisions are having a positive impact. It is therefore important that states and districts seriously consider the business of assessing reform.

In the final analysis, all education reforms aim to improve the overall performance of students; it is therefore critically important that states generate data that can document these improvements. Most states do not lack data about student performance; however, as Anderson (1985) has pointed out, states often confuse various assessment goals in designing student assessment tests. Thus, despite massive amounts of data, design, sampling, data collection, and analysis, some states do not produce a clear picture of overall student performance.

Moreover, there is an inevitable time lag between the introduction of reform measures and evidence that they are having an impact. For example, several popular measures to im-

prove teacher quality are designed to attract higher quality students into the profession. It will be several years before they will have a demonstrable effect on the career choices of high school and college students, however, and still more years before effects can be seen in schools. This does not mean that states should not consider important indicators and work immediately to collect data as a baseline against which to compare future results.

Furthermore, as Shanker (1984) has indicated, it will be five to ten years before student test scores reflect the impact of current reforms. If waiting this long will be tantamount to relegating the reform movement to the deep recesses of interest of both state policymakers and the public, we should

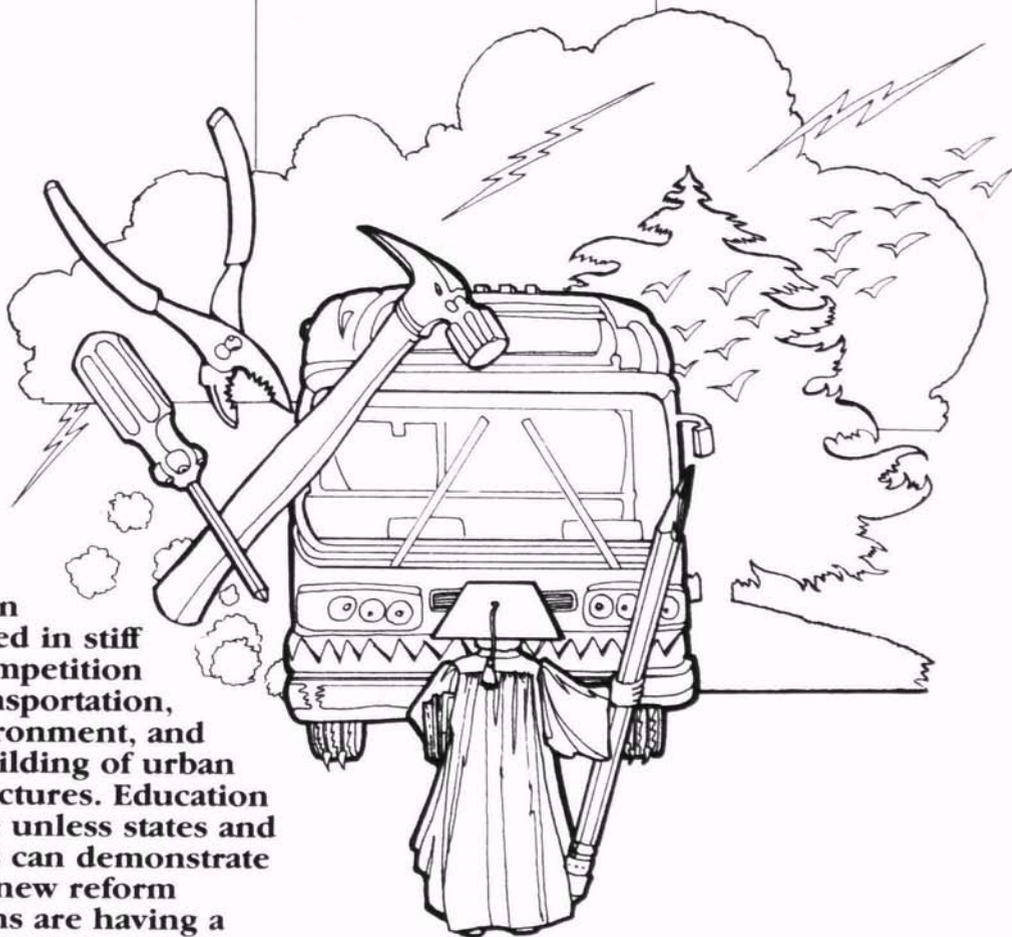
develop other ways to document the impact of reform, perhaps by focusing on other objectives of the reform movement—on what McDonnell (1984) called "intermediate implementation goals."

Since these goals depend on the purpose and precise nature of a reform provision, they vary widely from provision to provision and from state to state. However, establishing intermediate implementation goals and assessing the degree to which these goals are met can provide us with important information about changes in education.

Consider the issue of improving the quality of teaching. Many states have enacted changes in certification, compensation, and recruitment of teachers, and many are designing ways to

increase the quality of teachers in classrooms. Rather than simply measuring the performance of students over time, the quality of teachers should be examined on an intermediate basis. States could measure the quality of entering teachers; observe a sample of teachers in classrooms; and gather data on teacher satisfaction, attendance, and attitudes. Such measures could be studied over time to see whether higher quality teachers are, in fact, being attracted to the profession, remaining in the profession, and becoming better teachers. Data on classroom time-on-task; student attitudes and attendance; and the incidence of student vandalism, violence, dropouts, and disruption could all be collected as indicators of improved classroom instruction.

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These are but two examples of many possible implementation goals. Changes in these indicators are likely to develop in a relatively short period of time, and it is important to document such changes to develop accountability and maintain public interest in education.

At the heart of several recent state efforts is the development of multiple indicators of aspects of education likely to affect student achievement by: (1) providing information about aspects of the educational process that are important to interpreting student achievement; (2) examining the achievement of multiple goals; (3) providing information about factors believed to be closely related to student outcomes and directly influenced by state and local policy (Burnes, 1985); and (4) providing the basis for establishing statewide targets for improving education, as has been done in California.

Failure Could Be Catastrophic

Unless states develop such strategies and develop them quickly, the education community may have considerable difficulty documenting the improvements taking place in education. Such failure could, at the very least, lead to a considerable lessening of policymaker and public interest in education. At worst, these groups could grow increasingly disenchanted with the reform efforts that they helped to generate and support—a potentially catastrophic development for the future of public education. □

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