

# Six Criteria for Evaluating State-Level Education Policies

Education reform policies are more likely to achieve their goals if they are fair to all legitimate stakeholders, respect schools' organizational integrity, link ends and means realistically, are consistent with other state actions, are cost effective, and are politically achievable.

The ASCD Task Force on State Policy Initiatives began its work by reviewing criteria for evaluating recent education policy changes. As a member of the task force I suggested that answers to six basic questions reveal whether a policy is properly formulated or legitimately applied to the public schools. These six questions examine political as well as technical dimensions of school reform. They recognize that greater commitment and better organization are at least as important to school improvement as enhanced teaching skills or stronger accountability systems.

**Criterion 1. Is the policy democratic (small "d")? That is, does it reflect the goals and interests of legitimate stakeholders, while still embodying the larger public interest?**

This criterion could be met either procedurally or analytically. Procedurally, a policy is democratic if legitimate stakeholders have appropriately participated (or have been represented) in the development and adoption

of the policy. Analytically, it is democratic if its actual effects accommodate all legitimate interests (even if these interests were not formally involved in policy formation). In either case, the legitimate interests of the public at large must be properly balanced with the separate interests of special groups. Legitimate stakeholders in education include, at least:

1. *Students*—they have rights to fair treatment and high-quality educational services.

2. *Families*—they have a legitimate interest in the care of their children and an investment interest in the education they receive.

3. *Teachers*—they have an interest in their working conditions and an expertise interest in the character of their teaching obligations.

4. *School administrators*—they have an interest in the integrity of the school organization and a legitimate interest in their working conditions.

5. *Local district citizens (voters)*—they have a fiscal interest in the schools as well as a set of social and political interests in the nature of the education that is provided.

6. *State governments*—they have a constitutional responsibility for creating and maintaining school systems, and an increasingly vivid set of economic development interests in the quality of the education services provided.

7. *The national civic community*—they have a long-standing set of moral, political, social, and economic goals for education, especially in the area of developing the national economy and the national civic culture.

8. *Corporations, universities, and the military*—they are the principal consumers of educational outputs and have a legitimate interest in the number and quality of high school graduates, which translates into a less precise set of interests in the whole school system.

In reviewing state policies, it is appropriate to assess which of these interest groups have participated in their formation and which have had their legitimate interests appropriately incorporated into the specific provisions of the policy.

**Criterion 2. Does the policy recognize the need for and appropriately support the organizational integrity of the schools?**

To meet this criterion a policy must provide for an appropriate balance among several key dimensions of organizational integrity. There are many ways to conceptualize these dimensions. For example:

The policy needs to have both an appropriate theory of *teaching and learning* (the primary business of the school) and an adequate conception of human behavior in *complex organizations* (the universal form of schooling in America).

Learning theories that assume isolated tutorial relationships between teachers and students are not applicable to ordinary schools. By the same token, organizational elegance does not necessarily assure that any education will actually take place.

Recent scholarship gives us some provocative starting points for this kind of analysis. For example, it is becoming evident that behavioristic psychology, with its emphasis on reinforcement-based learning, does not give adequate attention to problem solving and other higher-level thinking skills. Hence, student testing and teaching strategies that focus on direct instruction and reinforcement of responses may increase short-term

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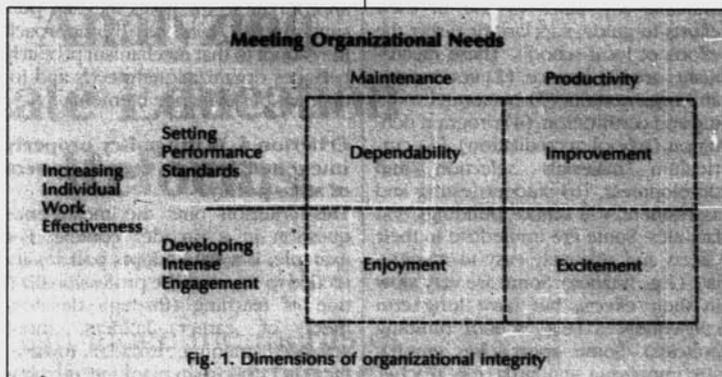


Fig. 1. Dimensions of organizational integrity

achievement at the expense of long-term intellectual development. Less clear, but equally important, policies that force teachers to emphasize their roles as “achievement producers” at the expense of their responsibilities for child nurture and development are clearly making assumptions about teaching and learning processes and should be evaluated in terms of whether or not those assumptions are correct.

Recent work on organizational cultures is also relevant. It is now clear that policy effects are dramatically shaped by the extent to which the organizational units toward which they are directed have robust cultural norms and by whether the policies are aligned with, or opposed to, those norms. There is good reason to believe that many schools have been disorganized rather than redirected by some recent policy initiatives.

Organizational integrity has two overlapping dimensions. As suggested in figure 1, by attending to the intersections among these two basic dimensions, policies emphasize quite different approaches to increasing school effectiveness.

The “school improvement” movement has generally focused on improved organizational productivity through increasing performance standards for students and teachers. If we adopt the view that school effectiveness suffers more from lack of excitement (i.e., students and teachers are not intensely engaged in the productive processes); lack of enjoyment (i.e., students and teachers so dislike being in the schools for six hours a day that

they cannot attend to productivity problems); or lack of dependability (i.e., the process is so fragmentary and lacking in procedural standards as to make it difficult for students and teachers to meet routine expectations), then many of the school improvement policies being put forward by state policymakers will not have their intended effects. But if setting higher standards of productivity is the most pressing problem, then state policies are appropriately oriented and can be evaluated on the basis of criteria set forth below.

**Criterion 3. Does the policy make a realistic means-ends linkage? Does it (1) provide adequate incentives for individual compliance, (2) attack a central, high-leverage intervention mechanism, and (3) reflect a realistic grasp of the organizational, political, ideological, and sociocultural forces that will lead people to resist its implementation?**

When it comes to the matter of improving performance standards for individuals, for example, does the policy offer both “screens” and “magnets”? That is, does it both set forth explicit standards and provide suitable rewards to those who meet the new standards? Similarly, when it comes to encouraging new programs and practices, does the policy recognize the importance of local adaptation and planning as part of the process of getting individuals to “own” the changes they are required to make?

There are, I think, seven independent “high-leverage” mechanisms

available for states to use in their efforts to guide, support, or direct the efforts of local schools. These mechanisms are (1) finance, (2) governance and organization, (3) personnel training and certification, (4) program definition (school accreditation), (5) curriculum materials selection and development, (6) student testing and assessment, (7) school buildings and facilities. Some are immediate in their effects and relatively easy to manipulate (e.g., finance). Some are very slow in their effects, but have long-term consequences (e.g., school building policies). Some approaches emphasize improving standards (e.g., teacher competency testing); others emphasize improving emotional engagement (e.g., merit pay). Some approaches assist with school stabilization and maintenance (e.g., collective bargaining for teachers or due process requirements for students), while others emphasize productivity (e.g., graduation requirements). A policy may be evaluated by assessing (1) whether the mechanism chosen by policymakers is

appropriate to the goals they are pursuing and (2) whether the approach they adopt to that mechanism properly balances organizational needs and individual performance elements.

**Criterion 4. Is the policy properly integrated into an overall system of state policy?**

This criterion puts the means-ends question in a broader context. For example, if a state adopts policies intended to improve the professionalization of teaching (through development of career ladders, more advanced training, broader involvement in curriculum planning, etc.) but meanwhile maintains a narrow industrial union approach to labor relations or demeans teachers by subjecting them to highly publicized and narrowly constructed literacy tests, the professionalization policies will probably not reach their espoused goals. Similarly, if a state increases economic incentives for teachers in an effort to attract more able young people into the profession, but simultaneously ne-

glects construction and maintenance of school buildings, or makes teachers vulnerable to special interest group curriculum demands, they may find that the increased remuneration will not have the expected effect.

**Criterion 5. Does the policy have a positive benefit/cost ratio? If so, is it larger or smaller than for various alternative policies?**

This criterion is conceptually very straightforward. Is the policy worth the effort and cost to implement it? We must remind ourselves, however, that the seductive simplicity of cost/benefit analysis does not make it easy to apply. It is extraordinarily difficult to identify all of the costs or all of the benefits associated with a policy. Dollar calculations are almost always misleading, especially when the policy involves provision of public services.

**Criterion 6. Is the policy politically feasible and/or palatable compared to alternative means for achieving the same result?**

Here again the concept is simple enough: could we get the same result in a way that causes less anxiety, hostility, and disruption? But the answer is at least as difficult to calculate as costs and benefits. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to evaluate a state's approach to education policy by asking whether it has given proper weight to the disruptive consequences of any policy change and whether it has adopted a policy with the greatest chance of success at the lowest cost in social disruption.

These criteria, while difficult to apply to a general concept like career ladders, competency testing, or increased graduation requirements, offer a framework for analyzing the specific provisions of a particular initiative. ASCD members may find these criteria useful for evaluating proposed or newly adopted policies in their states. □

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