Analyzing
State Education
Reforms

We can judge the merits of a policy by determining the problem it is supposed to solve and then reviewing what is known about the problem and its intended solution.

From the many proposed reforms recommended in the various commission reports, a dizzying number of new policies have emerged. Designed to address problems in American education, these policies have been shaped by widely differing points of view.

The subsequent stresses of implementation raise questions about what problems these solutions are supposed to address and about whose interests are being served by the reforms. Educators are asking whether the proper role of policy is to mandate changes or to assist with school improvement. We want to know how to make the reforms work, but we also wonder how we can press our own views in the next round.

We recognize that policymakers are under pressure to act and that despite tensions, practitioners must implement official policies. Nevertheless, as we struggle to follow the mandates, we believe they must be evaluated objectively. To assist in this process we have developed a five-step procedure for analyzing any state-level policy.

Step One. Identify the problem(s) to which the policy is directed. Because policies are intended solutions to problems, we must define the problem before analysis can tell us whether the policy is successful or beneficial. Without a clear definition of the problem, policymakers are unlikely to produce a promising solution; in fact, the “solution” may actually make the problem worse. Of course, problems are not simple, but defining them is critical because the way a problem is conceptualized has everything to do with the kinds of solutions that are appropriate.

Step Two. Identify the policy designed to address the problem. As we narrow our view from a general concern to a specific problem and then from numerous possibilities to a specific policy, we begin to see the connection between problem and solution. Policy statements often make this focus difficult. Policymakers simplify difficult issues and concentrate on symbolic meanings in order to capture the support of a large constituency. This effort to make things simple may result in making them simplistic. As compromises are made, clarity about both problem and policy may be lost. If in analyzing a policy we find that the link between problem and solution seems fuzzy or tenuous, we may have identified a fundamental weakness.

Step Three. Identify assumptions about the problem and the solution. Any policy is based on a number of assumptions. If, for example, observers lament a decline in test scores, what assumptions do they hold about student achievement and school success? If they prescribe increased graduation requirements and increased student testing to remedy the prob-
problem, what assumptions underlie those policy solutions? Just as we looked for connections between problem and solution in steps one and two, we are now looking for connections with the underlying assumptions. These first three steps are the prerequisites to policy analysis.

It is day-to-day school practice, of course, not a policymaker's assumptions about it, that determines whether a particular reform works. Hence, it is critical in evaluating any policy to know whether the assumptions accurately reflect the realities of the educational system. One must keep in mind that the assumptions embedded in a policy have no necessary connection to those held by the policymakers who put it together. Assumptions may not be clearly recognized even by the policy's strongest supporters, since they often result from compromises necessary to get the policy adopted—compromises that may have nothing to do with the policy itself.

Step Four. Review what is known about the specific problem and the specific policy solution under study. The knowledge that can be brought to bear on policy analysis comes from the usual sources: practical experience, research findings, and the observations and judgments of scholars. By systematically listing what is known, we are conducting a realistic appraisal of the policy solution.

Step Five. Identify other ways of looking at the problem and/or the solution designed to address the problem. The fifth step in understanding policy involves a return to the original problem with a broadened conception of how to approach it. Once we have defined the problem, examined the specifics of the policy solution, assessed the assumptions underlying both, and brought knowledge to bear, we are in a position to reassess the problem. In the light of the knowledge base, are the assumptions correct? Is the policy likely to solve the problem or contribute to a solution, or will it create new problems? Will it have unanticipated side effects?

Often the knowledge base about effectiveness of a given approach may not be sufficient to produce conclusive answers to these questions. However, this method of analysis alerts us to be realistic about our expectations for a policy's success. As we identify omissions, unwarranted assumptions, or unbalanced approaches, we can see which policies are likely to fail and which may need amendment. We can also see which policies have some chance to succeed.

Should this critical examination of policy point out contradictions between the policy's assumptions and what is known, we must then ask if there are other ways to address the problem. Are there alternative approaches that have a greater chance of success?

In the ASCD Panel Report we apply this five-step method of policy analysis in a discussion of general school reform and then to three specific types of policies: student testing, salary structures, and administrative training centers. In each case we identify weaknesses in current policies and offer another way of thinking about them. We also provide a step-by-step process for task force development and policy analysis that can be applied to those policies affecting you. Finally, to prepare readers for the next wave of reform, we review several important policy issues that are emerging.

Copies of this report may be ordered through the ASCD Order Processing Department. Ask for stock number 611-86038; $6.00.

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