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OVERVIEW

REACHING OUR GOALS

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More than a year ago President Bush, speaking for himself and the nation's governors, announced a set of goals for American education. I argued then with my skeptical colleagues that setting national targets could be a good idea, because I believed that those who declared goals would feel responsible for helping achieve them. Now, though, having seen no evidence of substantial change, I have begun to think that the goals will just provide another opportunity to blame the schools for not living up to expectations.

What is the point of setting targets so ambitious that they can be attained only with extraordinary effort—and then continuing with business as usual? For example, educators know they could be much more effective if every child came to school "ready to learn." And they know the enormous changes that would be required in the values, living patterns, and support structures of American families to make that a reality.

Or assume for the moment that we truly intended that American students should be "first in the world in science and mathematics" by the year 2000. The steps needed immediately—teacher retraining and recruitment, major improvements in working conditions, extensive curriculum revision—would be comparable in scope to the massive transfer of military personnel and equipment to Saudi Arabia.

But that's logic, not politics. Politicians deal with aspirations and symbols as much as with reality. A few weeks ago I observed a meeting of the panel capably chaired by Governor Roy Romer of Colorado that is setting up machinery to monitor the goals. The panel members—six governors, the four highest-ranking members of Congress, and four other key national figures—are being advised by a knowledgeable group of distinguished educators, including Ernest Boyer and Lauren Resnick. At this point they are restricting their attention to their assigned task: "charting progress" toward meeting the goals. In time, however, they or their successors surely must turn to how that progress can be attained. I hope it's like the tar baby; once they're stuck they won't be able to let go.

The authors in this issue put the matter in fresh perspective. Elliot Eisner (p. 10) contends that such goals do not represent what young people most need to learn anyhow. He proposes instead a set of aims that are probably more in line with those of ASCD members: exploring ideas, formulating questions and seeking answers, developing literacy in its many forms, being part of a caring community, exercising imagination, becoming a unique individual.

Grant Wiggins (p. 18) adds that, based on his recent work with schools on restructuring projects, he has concluded that high standards are not primarily national but are "brutally local." To evaluate student work, he advises, teachers should refer to models of excellent performance scaled to reflect progressive stages of growth. It is not necessary that the faculty of every school devise such models for themselves, Wiggins believes, but it is essential that every teacher demand the high quality work that the models represent. That is what he means when he says quality is a local issue.

Wiggins is undoubtedly right, so what needs to happen at state and national levels? The answer is that while government agencies may not be able to raise standards unilaterally, they can help create the *conditions* most likely to produce local quality. For example, they can minimize external regulation of schools and support first-rate teacher training and curriculum development. They can influence the pattern of incentives that help determine what people do and don't do: incentives for students to take challenging courses and work hard at them, for able young people to become teachers, and so on. Government policies affect such things. These conditions include, for example, much less external regulation of schools and much more support for professional activity, including research, curriculum development, and first-rate training.

Meanwhile, regardless of what presidents and governors do, educators have primary responsibility for what actually happens. Ironically, if they set their sights on the goals Eisner advocates and cultivate quality in their own local schools, they will be doing what the politicians may have meant to call for all along. □

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