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OVERVIEW

COPING WITH CHANGE

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We don't need any more evidence that Alvin Toffler (1970) was right when he warned in *Future Shock* that the waves of change would come faster and faster. A year ago we were celebrating the astonishing liberation of Eastern Europe and the end of the cold war. Some of us were criticizing the waste of money on stealth airplanes and proposing ways to spend the peace dividend. We had no idea that the U. S. would soon fight and win a full-scale war.

The changes affecting education are not as visible as the dismantling of the Berlin wall or the bombing of Baghdad, but they too are overwhelming. Today's students are different in many ways from those of previous generations; for example, many of them come from the socioeconomic groups that generally do not do well in school. The knowledge and skills we are trying to teach them are not necessarily what adults will need in tomorrow's world; specialists in science and mathematics are convinced that curriculum and instruction in these subjects must be radically different (Willoughby 1991). And the technology of our profession—the way we go about our work—is hopelessly old-fashioned. These problems are especially troublesome at a time when the U. S. must contend with unprecedented economic competition.

Meanwhile, most schools continue to function much as they always have. Some individuals understand the urgency of our situation, but life around us looks about the same from day to day, so the need for a substantially different response is not apparent to many of those who would need to support proposed changes.

To help develop the necessary consensus, leading school systems have begun using strategic planning. After gathering data about social and economic trends and about strengths and weaknesses of the school system, leaders declare their organization's mission and draw up action plans to achieve their goals.

ASCD has used this process twice in the last few years to ponder the future and set new targets. In the mid-1980s we decided, as the result of such an exercise, to concentrate on a few key areas. One, for example, was

teaching thinking, which became the topic of numerous publications, videotapes, institutes, and conferences.

Satisfied that strategic planning had helped us concentrate our efforts, we went through the process again last year and this time chose five focus areas: early childhood education, restructuring schools, expanded assessment, higher student achievement, and global education. In addition, we determined to play a larger role in helping educators plan curriculum and apply technology. A major vehicle for accomplishment of this latter aim is ASCD's new Curriculum Technology Resource Center, headed by Director Frank Betts.

The authors in this issue describe alternative models of strategic planning and comment on various aspects of the process. Mary Nebgen (p. 26), for example, reviews use of strategic planning in the Tacoma, Washington, schools and stresses that communication is essential at every step. Roger Kaufman and Jerry Herman (p. 4) pin-point several common errors, the most important of which is neglecting to think big; don't worry about courses, content, and resources, they advise, until you have first envisioned the kind of world in which you want your children and grandchildren to live.

That, of course, is the problem: the use of any particular technical procedures does not guarantee intelligent decisions.

So will strategic planning help school systems take the great leaps needed to catch up with a world that keeps moving at breakneck speed? In some cases, yes. Sound procedures increase the likelihood that school leaders will think ahead and will therefore be ready to adapt to whatever the future brings. Even more important, if they have involved their staff and community in their deliberations, these leaders will be in a better position to move ahead. □

References

- Toffler, A. (1970). *Future Shock*. New York: Random House.
Willoughby, S. (1990). *Mathematics Education for a Changing World*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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