Educational Accountability in an Era of Global Decentralization
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Socio-cultural changes and increased demand for accountability are setting the stage for a significant movement away from standardized models of schooling and an increase in school choice options. As a wider variety of themes and curricula becomes the norm, there is a need for institutions of higher education to develop viable ways to assist schools in the implementation of their particular visions. This paper proposes a set of tasks that will need to be accomplished by all schools as our society increasingly adopts school choice. Of special concern are ways that institutions of higher learning can facilitate the development and implementation of a school's vision as well as assessing and evaluating the implementation and resultant student learning.

The accountability of schools and educational systems is a major issue today in the U.S. and around the world. In the U.S., state departments of education have developed approved curricula and a mandated state testing policies (Hamilton & Stecher, 2004) with a focus on the assessment of student basic skills achievement as measured by standardized tests (Stake, 1998). Additionally, the No Child Left Behind legislation (see http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml) has put schools under increasing pressure to demonstrate student success on these tests (Linn, Baker & Betebenner, 2002). Similar high-stakes testing is occurring throughout the world (Lemke et al., 2001, 2004).

This high-stakes testing approach, while controversial (Lederman & Burnstein, 2006), has met with some success in raising achievement scores (Braun, 2004; Rosenshine, 2003). Despite these improvements, there is still widespread dissatisfaction with neighborhood public schools, giving rise to an increased emphasis on alternative means of schooling (Belfield, 2004).

The Impetus for School Choice

The industrial-age model of training and service delivery currently serving as the primary model for schooling functioned well for the first 75 years of the twentieth century. High school graduation rates in the United States rose from less than 10% at the beginning of the century to about 70% by 1975 (Greene, 2002) and 74% by 2003 (Tab, 2006), accompanied by substantial increases in economic productivity (Becker, 1993). Even so, beginning with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), there has been a growing criticism of the American schooling system (Haynes & Chalker, 1997). Simultaneously, the world is in the throes of one of the most significant changes in human history—the movement from the industrial-age to the post-industrial or information age (Huitt, 1995). Toffler and Toffler (1995) consider this to be the most important paradigm shift, epitomized by a conflict between the industrial-age manufacturers and the information-age networkers as to how individuals and institutions should best operate.

While criticism of schooling is not new (e.g., Dewey, 1980; Gibboney, 1994), there are a number of trends associated with the transition to the information age that directly impact how

these criticisms are addressed. In the industrial-age paradigm, standardization with interchangeable parts was advocated as a way to increase organizational efficiency and effectiveness (Taylor, 1998). This led to an emphasis on management of the processes of manufacturing as the primary approach to achieving efficient use of resources and effective attainment of outcomes, the approach advocates of test-based reform most value (Linn, 2001). Standardized outcome measures produce standardized curricula and standardized methods of instruction because what is measured has a tremendous influence on participants' actions (Hummel & Huitt, 1994).

However, the transition to the information-age brought with it a different set of principles that educators need to use to increase school effectiveness. Three of the most important associated trends, decentralization, a customized economy, and speed of change, are well-established in the business and industrial sectors of the economy as a direct result from increased use of technology for communication and decision making (Huitt, 1995).

In a decentralized approach to schooling, decisions about curricula, as well as standards and evaluation instrumentation, are made at the level of implementation. It would be up to those who engage students in the learning process to decide to follow international-, national-, or state-developed curricula, standards, and related evaluation processes or to develop these locally. It would then be the responsibility of those individuals to demonstrate they have added value to student learning over and above that expected, given contextual factors such as school size, education level of parents, type of community, and/or student participation in religious activities (Huitt, 1999). From this perspective, outside agencies audit school performance, not dictate its curriculum through mandatory tests covering objectives that school personnel may, or may not, deem important.

An increasingly customized economy allows the consumer to select or design a product or service that meets an individual's or group's exact needs rather than accepting a pre-packaged alternative. It is this issue that should be driving the topic of school choice. The ability to select from a number of alternatives has increased the opportunity for parents to make choices when selecting a quality schooling experience for their children. However, making good choices depends on having good data, which is not always the case in school choice decisions (Garn, 2001; Van Dunk & Dickman, 2004).

A rapid rate of change requires that educators be cognizant of important developments and respond accordingly, while at the same time holding on to important values and principles. Covey (1989, 1991) refers to this as principle-centered decision making. He suggested that trying to adapt to a fast-changing world without an enduring set of principles will lead to disaster. The key, of course, is identifying those principles and values that are time-independent and not those that pertain to a particular culture or society.

Choice Options for Public Schools

There are those who believe the option of school choice and homeschooling represent a threat to the public school system laboriously developed over the last two centuries in this and other industrialized countries (Noguera, 1993; Patrinos & Ariasingam, 1997). From this perspective, choice options must be fought and eliminated, if possible, or at least held to current levels of participation. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it is apparent that increased choice is rational development associated with the change from an agricultural/industrial economy at the beginning of the twentieth century to one based on service and information production and

exchange at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Huitt, 1995). School choice is therefore a natural by-product of a changing social environment.

Within the schooling industry, there has been a proliferation of schooling alternatives ranging from vouchers, to secular and religious private schools, homeschooling, and public magnet and charter schools (Bielickn, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001; Hadderman, 2002). By 2003, fully 25% of K-12 students in the United States were not attending their public neighborhood school (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen & Tobin, 2004), a decrease of 7.5% in ten years.

There are little data regarding the number of students using vouchers; however, what data are available suggest the numbers are not large and are declining (Pons, 2002). There were 5.3 million students enrolled in 29,273 private schools in 2001 (Tab, 2004) and approximately 1.1 million students participating in homeschooling in 2003 (Princiotta, Bielick & Chapman, 2006). These two options accounted for approximately 13 percent of school-aged students.

The magnet, charter, and open enrollment options are public schools with different forms of governance. Magnet schools are under the control of the district school board and were developed in the 1970s as an option for addressing desegregation. In 1992, there were over 2400 magnet schools with an additional 3200 magnet programs offered within traditional schools (Steel & Levine, 1994). By 1996, over 1.5 million students attended magnet schools or programs (Black, 1996). However, by 2001, the number of magnet schools had declined to 1736 (Hoffman, 2003). Magnet schools and programs have begun to shift their focus towards providing a rich alternative experience for students. Over 25 themes range from traditional academic achievement (some with a focus of language arts, mathematics, or science) to arts inclusion, technology inclusion, and international studies. Business and finance, ecology and the environment, justice and law, and travel and tourism are some additional themes (Magnet Schools of America, 2005).

A second option, the charter school, is a relatively more recent movement. The first state law governing charter schools in the U. S. was written in 1991 in Minnesota (Wikipedia, 2006). Charter schools are under the governance of a private contract and, therefore, are outside the control of the local school board. By 1997, there were 787 charter schools in 30 states (Blakemore, 1998); in January 2004, there were 698,142 students in 2,996 charter schools in 37 states (Center for Education Reform, 2005). Ten states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin) accounted for 2655 schools or 73% of the total. The themes used to organize charter schools are even more wide-ranging than those of magnet schools.

A third option is for a district to allow enrollment in any school within the district (often referred to as open enrollment) without restrictions to geographical boundaries. Students are enrolled on a first-come, first-served basis. Thirty-two states have enacted legislation that mandates school districts provide the option of student attendance at non-neighborhood schools. Some even mandate that students can attend any school in the state. However, most districts do not provide transportation to alternatively-selected schools and some states allow schools to charge a fee for attendance (Education Commission of the States, 2003). While there are little data as to the exact number of school districts providing open enrollment, there is no doubt that the phenomenon is growing (Sweetland, 2002). There is some evidence that small districts might not be able to offer students and parents a choice of schools (Hoffman, 2003). However, where only one school exists at a given level, schools-within-a-school have been established that allow for a variety of themes and curricula to be implemented (Dewees, 1999).

Choice and Accountability

There is some concern that school choice and accountability may not be able to coexist (Figlio & Page, 2001). However, Garn (2001) suggests that a combination of accountability models may be necessary to adequately address the complexity of schooling choices. He describes four models that can be used:

1. Bureaucratic—based on compliance with preset standards and regulations; compliance is monitored by local, state, or federal employees.
2. Professional—based on peer-accepted demonstrations of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of a competent educator.
3. Performance—based on data of educator and/or student behavior, including scores on standardized tests.
4. Market—based on parental and/or student choice among schools; consumer selection or non-selection is the basis of being designated a good or poor school.

A heavy reliance on bureaucratic and professional accountability meshed well with the industrial-age model of education of the twentieth century. In an era when "one size fits all" was the model for schooling, the use of bureaucratic and professional certification approaches to schooling accountability made sense (Garn, 2001). National or state governments set curriculum and achievement standards, teacher-training institutions trained credentialed professionals to address those standards, and the federal government provided funds for researching and disseminating information regarding best practices. When there was one standard for school achievement and a reasonable agreement about what educators should do to help students meet that standard, then accountability systems could be structured relative to it. For example, most states publish student scores on standardized tests as an indicator of school performance. The federal government gathers similar data for national assessment purposes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006); international assessments are also completed (Lemke et al., 2001, 2004).

However, the rapid growth of magnet and charter schools, which are attempts to provide school choice within a public school setting, are beginning to place different demands on accountability systems (Betebenner, Howe & Foster, 2005; Stecher & Hamilton, 2002). When a school can select from a variety of educational models and approaches, as is done with magnet and charter schools, it becomes much more problematic to develop accountability standards and data. Alternative schools offer a wide variety of curricula, ranging from relatively traditional cognitive-behavioral or social-cognitive approaches to those based on Montessori, emotional-intelligence, multiple-intelligence, the arts, or technology (Magnet Schools of America, 2002). Unfortunately, these schools are hampered in their attempts to demonstrate their effectiveness as they are judged using the singular assessment of high-stakes standardized achievement tests (e.g., Hoxby, 2004).

In order for choice to work properly, a parent should be able to review a school's vision and mission statements, along with particulars such as curriculum, teacher preparedness, and facilities when making an informed choice. Educators (whether they are based in schools, homes, or some combination) must be empowered to develop an educational experience that will meet the needs and demands of parents and students. Of course, they must then be held accountable for professionally implementing the curriculum, creating appropriate learning experiences, and student achievement on those objectives selected.

There are a number of tasks that supporters of school choice can carry out as they prepare to assist schools in developing a program:

1. Develop a method and the expertise to assist schools in identifying the dominant philosophy and values that will guide the school's operation.
2. Develop a companion process that assists the school in the development of vision and mission statements.
3. Identify likely themes or approaches that will be available for schooling PreK-12 students (Breider, 2000). Gardner (1999) identified fourteen different approaches or pathways for learning that are either heavily used at present or are possible viable alternatives. These range from an academic focus that promotes traditional historical and artistic values derived from American and Western cultures to a multicultural pathway that highlights the contributions and values of the major racial and ethnic groups found in this country and across the globe. These are similar to themes identified by magnet and charter schools, although the particular implementations of schools make the issue much more complex.
4. A corollary step is to identify effective research-based practices by which each theme or approach can be successfully implemented.
5. Identify curricula and accompanying standards of academic achievement that include minimally adequate, nationally adequate, and world class criteria. Minimally adequate might be the prerequisites necessary to complete the minimum standards at the next instructional level. Nationally adequate could be the standards necessary to prepare for entrance into technical or college-level work. World class standards would place the student in the top 15% of student achievement in the world.
6. Identify or develop curricula and means of assessing and evaluating alternative desired outcomes such as moral character, emotional and social development, or specific knowledge and skills associated with themes such as business, law, or technology.
7. Develop means of formative and summative assessment of educator performance and student learning that would address different philosophies, visions, missions, and standards. Assessment should primarily focus on criterion-referenced, rather than norm-referenced methodologies, as the standards for success at different levels of attainment are explicitly stated.
8. Identify learning theories, teaching methods, specific curriculum, lesson plans, and so forth that educators could use to facilitate students meeting established goals.
9. Establish standards of teacher education and performance that will allow educators to competently set up and run schools and classrooms for a particular vision, mission, etc. Darling-Hammond (2000) presented evidence that teacher quality is an important component of student achievement and, in general, teacher training institutions are providing well-trained educators to our schools. In fact, alternative credentialing procedures for teacher certification do not appear to develop comparable teacher quality (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002).
10. Establish an educator credentialing process, coursework, assessment methods, etc. This means working with state-level credentialing departments for visions the state wants to facilitate; working with federal- or national-level certification programs for models of education that are recognized nationally as legitimate, but which the state does not want to allocate resources to develop.

11. Develop multiple educator training programs and degrees aimed at a selected number of models of schooling that can be delivered both on-campus and through distance learning and begin to network with other institutions to provide coursework in models that the institution does not have resources to deliver.

These tasks may seem daunting, but the fact is that much work has already been done. For example, the National School Boards Foundation (n.d.) developed a toolkit that includes a strategic planning process for the implementation of technology; this could easily be adapted by schools developing a vision, mission, goals, objectives, etc. A wide variety of standards and curricula exist for basic skills achievement, from those developed in every state before or as a result of No Child Left Behind legislation [http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml], to those assessed in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006), as well as widely accepted independently-derived curricula (e.g., Core Knowledge: http://www.coreknowledge.org/CK/index.htm; International Baccalaureate: http://www.ibo.org/). Curricula and educational materials have also been developed for a wide variety of additional domains such as cognitive processes (e.g., Wegener, 2005), emotional development (Denham, 1998; Gottman & Declaire, 1998), moral character (Vessels & Huitt, 2005), social development (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997), and parenting (Schiffer, 2002). What is necessary is to include these desired outcomes in the mission statements of schools and to systematically evaluate growth and achievement in these domains.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of information-age trends and pressure from federal legislation, it is reasonable to predict that diversification in both the aims of schooling and delivery systems will continue to grow. Diversity of institutional aims, goals, and governance is a major reason why the "American system of higher education is seen around the world as one of this country's greatest resources and as setting an international standard" (Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin, p. 40). This approach to excellence can serve as a model for school choice in K-12 schooling.

Whatever criticisms have been made regarding current schooling practices, there is wide-spread agreement among researchers that accountability is an important component of a successful schooling program. Transparent, high-quality accountability systems are critical if parents and other stakeholders are to be assured that students are provided high quality learning and developmental experiences. However, unless alternative domains and forms of accountability are included in school curricula, all schools will be held to the same standards of scores on high-stakes basic skills achievement tests, a significant impediment to real school choice.

Every society, deeply embedded in a fast-changing, chaotic, and challenging global economy, has a diversity of viewpoints as to how children and youth should be prepared for adulthood. This diversity should be welcomed and institutionalized in K-12 schools. Federal and state agencies should facilitate excellent implementation of these diverse views by facilitating the development of curricula and accountability systems that match selected visions, missions, and goals of schools. Teacher training institutions should coordinate their programs so that educators are prepared to teach in and administer these diverse programs. Communication links within and between diverse viewpoints need to be strengthened so that best practices can be quickly implemented and poor practices reduced.

Diversity within K-12 schools should be embraced, not fought. Rather than trying to enforce one standard of excellence, multiple visions of excellence must be considered and valued. As H. Jackson Brown, Jr. said, "People take different roads seeking fulfillment and happiness. Just because they're not on your road doesn't mean they've gotten lost.

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