

7.

Assessing

School Effectiveness

The indicators of effective schools and classrooms that we have discussed are specific and, in most cases, measurable. For those who want to assess their own schools or school systems, we offer a questionnaire in this chapter that summarizes these indicators of effectiveness. The questions are organized according to the major categories of our model: student behaviors, teacher behaviors, supervision, school climate, leadership, and student achievement.

The questions appear in the first column of the questionnaire. Following each question, in parentheses, is an index to the pages on which more information about the question can be found. The remaining five columns are for respondents to enter comments about the question.

In the second column, each question should be answered by indicating "Y" (yes) or "N" (no). The next column asks for an indication of how certain you are of your response: "0" is completely uncertain and "5" is completely certain. Naturally, not everyone in a school system can be certain about all the questions asked here. Where there appears to be consensus about the certainty or uncertainty of a particular response, these data may give clues about areas where more data are needed. Again, the questionnaire is set up so that you are the judge of the meaning of patterns in the data.

The column headed "What Data Do You Have?" is the most important. Here you are to indicate the kind of data that allowed you to answer the question "yes" or "no." This information may come from your experience as a teacher in a particular classroom or as administrator of a particular school. Or it may come from such sources as lesson plans,

logs of classroom interaction, calendars, evaluation reports, hearsay, or rumor. Try to be as specific as possible, for it may be important to know where some people get their data. Principals may get their data from teachers' plans, for example, while school board members may get theirs from parents or students they happen to know. Such sources may point to ways to systematize the school's data-gathering and reporting systems so that consensus is generated by everyone's having similar information.

In the next column, indicate who is responsible for the task or function in question. If you know who is responsible, write in that person's title; if no one is responsible, write in "no one." Finally, in the last column write in the title of the person who checks to make sure the responsible person is carrying out the responsibility. If no one performs such checks, write in "no one." Figure 1 shows how one principal filled out the first question.

Of necessity, the questions are quite general. For example, question 6 asks, "On the average, do students experience high levels of success in their daily work?" A precise answer to this question would require a knowledge of what happens in each classroom and at each grade level in each school. While we aren't suggesting that this information be collected on a systematic basis all the time, it might be interesting to check such data occasionally, especially in light of the great range of success on academic tasks that has been documented in previous studies. For example, the principal might ask for all teachers to report on how the students in their classes did on Friday's spelling test, or how

Figure 1. Sample Response to the Questionnaire.

		Answer Y/N	Certainty 0-5
Student Behaviors Involvement:			
1. On the average, is reading/language arts scheduled for at least two hours a day in elementary school? (10-12, 14-15, App. 1)		Y	5
What Data Do You Have?	Whose Responsibility?	Who Checks?	
School schedule Teachers' lesson plans (except kindergarten)	Principal Teacher	Principal	

many children are failing English year after year, as possible ways to answer that question.

Some people we have shared the questions with were amazed that anyone would even want to question such things: "Most people take these things for granted." Whether most students are involved with academic work for most of the school day, for example, seems like a question it should not be necessary to ask in a school. Unfortunately, such obvious questions do need to be addressed. We believe that most schools will find such an exercise very confirming, however, because most schools are doing well on many of these indicators. The school administrators or supervisors who can answer most of these questions with a high degree of confidence are those who have designed effective management and supervision systems. For them, such questions and their answers will confirm their hard work and may suggest further areas for improvement. The answers may also indicate where the system can be more tightly coupled or coordinated.

Don't think that change strategies will be implemented quickly, however. As our next chapter indicates, it takes time to build an effective school. Organizational change happens over a three- to five-year period, so we suggest that, to start with, a staff should choose only one change area where success appears likely. The more difficult areas can be tackled in later years.

Using the Questionnaire

This questionnaire will work best when it is used by small groups of people who are concerned with student achievement. We suggest that groups interested in using the questionnaire begin with the student behavior questions, as these are most closely linked with student achievement. Three scenarios are suggested:

- **Scenario 1: school level.** At a faculty meeting, the research on student involvement, coverage, and success can be summarized. Then members of the faculty and administration fill out the questionnaire for the first seven questions. Results are tabulated according to grade level, and patterns across grade levels are generated as each grade level reports its findings. After the faculty meeting, grade-level representatives meet with the principal to discuss implications for program modification. When this is completed, another faculty meeting is held to review the research and answer the set of questions on teacher behaviors. Such a scenario may be most effective where schools are not strongly coordinated by a central office and each school has a high degree of autonomy and control over resources.

● **Scenario 2: district level.** For those districts that would like to take a look at how the district management structure influences school effectiveness, we recommend the following scenario. At a meeting of the management team (principals, relevant central office administrators, and the superintendent), participants review research on the particular dimension where change could most easily occur. They then fill out the questionnaire in that area, discern patterns across schools in the district, and generate implications for change.

● **Scenario 3: school board level.** The school board has a vital role in setting the general direction of the district. This questionnaire can be useful to the board in hiring the next superintendent. For example, question 4 on the questionnaire can be turned into an interview question: "How will you be able to assure the school board that students are covering the content and skills measured by our standardized tests?" By using such a question, the board not only gets an indication of the candidate's competence, but also gives the message that student achievement is important. School boards and superintendents can also use the questions to help set priorities for the coming year. Priorities can be set during a planning session at which board members are asked to rank the questions in the order of their importance for improvement during the coming year. The questionnaire then gives the superintendent and other administrators a structured way to look at the school district.

The questionnaire should be used as a process helper, focusing attention on significant questions but leaving it to the participants to decide what areas to collect data on and what the patterns in the data mean. Even the extensive research reported here is not strong enough to provide definitive standards in *all* areas for *all* schools. On the other hand, the areas delineated by the questions *do* have significance for all schools that want to improve their effectiveness.

The data generated by the questionnaire may be threatening to some members of a school's organization. A school board member we met outside a conference session with the title, "Is Your School Effective?" said he was frightened by the question and wasn't sure he really wanted to know the answer. A principal we spoke to responded, "How am I supposed to pay attention to all those questions and still run the school?" Another board member commented, "Now I have something to ask the superintendent next time we decide about his raise." Underlying these responses is a potential for conflict that can surface using this questionnaire. At the center of the conflict is what makes a school effective, and this is an important idea to debate. We would also like to emphasize that there seem to be no universal prescriptions that

are appropriate for all classrooms, all schools, or all districts. Rather, research and experience point to a number of areas that should receive focused attention when school or classroom effectiveness is an issue.

Despite any conflicts that might arise, the data generated by the questionnaire should be used to enhance the school's effectiveness. One way to analyze that data is to look for patterns of response. Three such patterns are:

● **Pattern 1.** Everyone answers "yes" to the question, cites similar data sources, names the same people as responsible, and agrees on who does the checking. If the data listed are similar to what is found in the research, then this pattern probably indicates that the school is effective when it comes to that particular question, or that a consensus has developed in this area.

● **Pattern 2.** Answers in the "yes/no" column are inconsistent. People cite different data sources and are unclear about who is responsible and who should check. This pattern may indicate that the formal organization pays little attention to this particular area. Or, it may indicate that different people perceive the answers in different ways, which suggests the need for further discussion, building toward consensus.

● **Pattern 3.** Everyone answers "no" and leaves blanks in many other columns. A consensus of "no" answers may indicate that the school or district is ignoring one of the factors that may lead to a more effective school.

After the data are collected and analyzed, priorities for change should be focused on those areas most likely to influence student achievement. In our model, those areas are student and teacher behaviors. Of course, management systems need to be in place to ensure the efficiency of any change. And the school board needs to understand and support the process if long-term improvement is sought. Such change is the central theme of the following chapter.