**Implementing Effective School Achievement Reform: Four Principles**
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*This paper provides an overview of four principles of school reform as it relates to improving student achievement as measured by scores on standardized tests of basic skills. These principles address issues regarding the need to: (1) focus classroom practice on objectives that will be measured; (2) take into account research showing that variance in test scores is the result of multiple factors, including the home and community; (3) treat the school as the level of change in education; and (4) provide incentives for teachers and schools that add value to student achievement beyond that provided by other social institutions.*

Educational reform is a major issue in the US today. Since the 1960s, research has documented what works. While many principles have been discovered, the following four deserve special consideration because they relate to the process of school reform. That is, the following principles describe some fundamental relationships in how the issue of school reform should be addressed, rather than what specific programs to implement. The four principles are:

1.   What You Measure Is What You Get (WYMIWYG);
2.   Education is the result of the efforts of more than just schools;
3.   Focus reform efforts on schools, not teachers; and
4.   Provide incentives for value added.

**What You Measure Is What You Get (WYMIWYG)**

There is a basic principle for any type of desired change: What You Measure Is What You Get (Hummel & Huitt, 1997). These authors use the acronym WYMIWYG to help remember this principle. As a general rule, what you focus on as an end result will be what you move towards. And you must be able to measure both outcomes and processes if you are to successfully manage resources and attain goals (Lingle & Schiemann, 1996).

The issue of assessment is critical to the functioning of schools (James, 1998). First, it can serve as a motivator of student performance. If students have been taught to value grades or other assessments, they will strive to do their best. Assessments also serve the function of providing feedback to teachers and to communicate to students, parents and others what has been learned.

Gallup poll results over the past twenty-five years point to the view that the public expects schools to impact academic achievement and character (Gallup, 1975, 1980; Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1992). The public apparently assumes that if students have demonstrated achievement in the basic skills and character, they will be sufficiently prepared for the adult world that is awaiting them.

Unfortunately, groups and individuals that have reviewed this issue report it is a much more complex task (e.g., Borman, Hanson, & Hedge, 1997; Huitt, 1995). The SCANS report (The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991) provides an excellent start

towards identifying the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for success in the 21st century, the information age. This report was developed by a group of leaders in business, industry, government, and education under the guidance of the Secretary of Labor. It outlines skills in two broad categories: foundational and competencies. The foundational skills include the basic skills with which the public is familiar. However, it also includes factors such as critical thinking and personal qualities such as integrity. The competencies include such factors as the ability to utilize resources and technology.

In a critique of the SCANS report, Huitt (1997) identifies some important outcome measures that were deemed important by futurists and other writers. For example, self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996) and optimism (Seligman, 1990, 1995) are only two of the numerous social and emotional variables that have been deemed important for the modern workforce. In fact, Goleman (1995) suggests that emotional factors (which he labels Emotional Intelligence) are at least twice as important for life success as are intellectual or cognitive achievement.

In the context of the information-based economy, it is probably more important to be able to identify competencies than to select based on credentials (Bridges, 1994). In fact, learning-to-learn skills will be more important than specific competencies as requirements of work projects change rapidly (Lawler, 1994).

Many of the qualities mentioned by the SCANS report and Huitt's critique can be measured reliably and validly as early as first grade (e.g., Chiu, 1997). However, in order for these alternatives to standardized testing to be politically viable, they need to connect schooling with the public at large (Dorn, 1998). That means that accountability systems that are capable of providing a means of filling the information gap between schools and the public need to be established, rather than simply having the media report test scores once a year (Henry, 1996; Murphy, 1999).

### Education Is The Result Of The Efforts Of More Than Just Schools

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed an ecological framework that identifies the interconnected systems that influence human development. Empirical work over the past 20 years generally supports this approach (e.g., Dixon, 1996; Ketsetzis, Ryan, & Adams, 1998; Pierce, Alfonso, Garrison, 1998; Webster-Stratton, 1997). We must therefore acknowledge that schools are only one influence on the development of children and youth.

Sanders (1998) illustrates how students' school-related attitudes and behaviors are triply benefited when the three contexts of school, home, and church are working toward the same goal of helping them succeed in school.  Students need strong programs of school-family-community partnerships so that these institutions can better combine and coordinate the resources and support they provide youth (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997).

Plenty of support for the impact of community, both in terms of structure or settings and processes. For example, Pong (1997) showed that the negative effect of single-parent families and stepfamilies on school achievement can be mitigated when social relations among parents are strong; Revilla and Sweeney (1997) showed that the negative impact of low socioeconomic status could be counteracted by school practices.

The main reason, however, for better communications and exchanges among schools, families, and community groups is to assist students at all grade levels to succeed in school and in life. Interestingly, the different purposes require different practices in comprehensive programs of partnership (Epstein, 1996).

Researchers readily acknowledge that the family, schools, and communities are primary influencers on human development (e.g., Epstein, 1996). However, they are less ready to acknowledge the positive influence of religious organizations. In the context of educating children and youth, religious organizations are an important source of social capital (Greeley, 1997). Religious organizations have an especially important influence in the area of character and moral development where religious scripture has provided guidance for centuries (Carter, 1993). In addition, Ginsburg and Hanson (1986) reported that students expressing a religious affiliation had higher school achievement.

School personnel need to enlist and encourage the support of the other social institutions primarily responsible for child and youth development. Epstein (1995) identified six types of involvement essential for a comprehensive program of school-family-community partnerships:

1) parenting--helping all families establish home environments that support children as students;
2) communicating--designing and conducting effective forms of communication about school programs and children's progress;
3) volunteering--recruiting and organizing help and support for school functions and activities;
4) learning at home--providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with schoolwork and school-related activities;
5) decision-making--including parents in school decisions and
6) collaborating with the community--identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen and support schools, students and their families.

These need to be included in any program of school reform. Without them, schools are trying to do the job all by themselves and that is going to be a much more difficult approach.

### Focus Reform Efforts On Schools, Not Teachers

While we have ample evidence that teachers' attitudes (e.g., Ashton, 1984; Proctor, 1985; Ross, 1995) and classroom behaviors (e.g., Joyce & Weil, 1995; Rosenshine, 1995; Squires, Huitt, Segars, 1983) impact student achievement, this is a necessary, not sufficient, condition for successful schooling. Schooling is a team, not an individual, activity. In team sports, individuals win awards, teams win championships. In business, individuals earn bonuses, companies earn profits. In the military, individuals earn medals, armies win wars. We need to acknowledge and support the school team that is in a position to make an impact year after year on the lives of children and youth.

One of the most prevalent messages of recent organizational literature is that the long-term success and survival of any business or enterprise depends on its ability to function as a "learning organization" (DuFour, 1997). Joyce and Calhoun (1995) state that educators should "make all schools learning communities for faculties as well as students--making use of the most powerful models of learning with both groups" (p. 51).

Four principles that define schools as learning organizations are:

1. Take an approach to professional growth that is purposeful and results-oriented--

individual growth is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for organizational growth;

2. Recognize that the best place for professional growth is the school itself--create job-embedded opportunities for learning and growth.

3. Develop a school culture that is receptive to change--the highest priority should be given to creating a context for staff development in which experimentation, collaboration, and commitment to continuous improvement are the norms throughout the school;

4. Regard professional development as a continuous process rather than an event--school personnel should view professional development not as a task to be completed, but as the ongoing work of a lifelong learner.

As Garmston and Wellman (1995) so eloquently put it:

Increasingly, self-renewing schools are collaborative places where adults care about one another, share common goals and values, and have the skills and knowledge to plan together, solve problems together, and fight passionately but gracefully for ideas to improve instruction (p. 11).

It is also important to recognize that the principal sets the standard and is the role model for school-wide reform (e.g., Reavis, Vinson & Fox, 1999). Principals should be selected who can provide leadership in the areas of vision development and goal setting.

**Provide Incentives For Value Added**

Just because a student or classroom or school or district has high levels of achievement or character or whatever else we choose to measure, does not mean that the school has necessarily played an important role in making that happen (Magdol, 1994). Because parents, religious organizations, and communities also play a vital role, it may be that the school is not meeting its obligations, but students are still scoring well on measures of student achievement. When we find a rural  or urban school that has students achieving on par with suburban schools (e.g., Boyd & Shouse, 1997) or students from a low socioeconomic background achieving as well as students from wealthier areas (e.g., Coleman and others, 1966),  we need to acknowledge that the school has added value over and above what the community provides. When we find a school with large portions of students whose mothers have not graduated from high school (Zill, 1992) or who do not have access to technology in the home (Perelman, 1992), we need to acknowledge that the school has added value over and above what is provided by the home environment. When we find a school with large numbers of students who are not affiliated with any religious organization, we need to acknowledge that the school has added value over and above that of those institutions. Therefore, we need to measure school success relative to the other institutional and contextual variables (Gewirtz, 1998).

Those interested in improving schooling need to learn from the business sector and business educators who propose a "balanced-scorecard" approach to managing change (Bailey, Chow, & Haddad, 1999). For example, the New York State Education Department developed a measure of a district's efficiency that allowed it to divide districts into those that are performing better or worse than predicted on the basis of student outcomes and district expenditures, taking into account districts' student background characteristics and district wealth. Districts could then be

assessed by the state as being either average, above average, or below average in terms of general quality, as defined by cost and student-outcome attributes (Monk, Nusser & Roellke, 1998).

## Summary and Conclusions

Educators need to make use of the best data science has to offer in terms of the programs that should be used to achieve our goals. And what message is provided by these data?

First, educators need to specify goals and objectives and commit the resources to measuring them on a systematic basis. These results need to be reported to the public in a timely and meaningful fashion, not just once a year in the local newspaper. Goals need to be broader than simply scores on a standardized achievement test--they need to encompass other factors that research has demonstrated lead to life and work success. Second, educators need to coordinate their efforts with the contributions made by the home, religious organizations, and community. The synergetic use of all resources will provide a better result than attempting to meet our goals using only the school's resources. Third, educators need to focus their efforts on improving schools; focusing on teachers, especially teacher knowledge or credentials, has not produced the same impact on student achievement. And finally, educators need to hold schools accountable for adding value over and above that contributed by the family, by religious organizations, and by the community. Simply because a school has students with high test scores does not mean it is a well-functioning institution.

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