

The **Urban Academy** is involved in a validity study conducted by NCREST at Teachers College, Columbia University, to determine the success of Academy graduates in freshman level college courses. Exit interviews are conducted with all graduates from the school, and graduates frequently return to participate on panels about preparation for college.

Third Valuable Feature: Student Assessment Committee Includes a Variety of People

Most of the participating schools have a committee that includes parents, teachers and – in secondary schools – students, or they encourage such collaboration in some other way. Schools found that having such a committee gave them access to important talent, ideas and insights they might not otherwise have used. Some schools were able to identify a specialist in evaluation who was willing to be a member of the committee, or a person involved in assessment as part of his or her job in government or business. Such people can offer a different, helpful perspective that produces a stronger evaluation.

Summit Middle School and **North Dade Center for Modern Languages** gave specific information regarding the structure of and focus of their committees.

Summit Middle School's Accountability, Accreditation and Assessment Committee is composed of two board members, four parents, an English teacher, the principal and a community member. Students are consulted in the development and design of student surveys, and other matters as appropriate.

The **North Dade Center for Modern Languages** has a governing body called the Educational Excellence School Advisory Council (EESAC). It is composed of teachers, school administrators, business leaders, parents and students. All stakeholders have direct input in the planning, implementation and assessment of student achievement in their school improvement plan. Stakeholders work together with a clear vision to sustain, monitor and improve student achievement.

Chapter Three:

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

Accountability involves a number of issues. Any accountability plan must start with a clear understanding of what schools and students are expected to achieve. Before talking about how to assess students, a school must be clear about what it is going to assess, and how faculty members will develop the skills they need to assess. Some things schools should consider include: 1) variety of goals, 2) level of goals, 3) specificity of goals, and 4) training needs.

Variety of Goals

The authors and participating schools believe that schools should include goals involving academic achievement. Some schools wish to include goals which go beyond academics – for example, goals related to character development, sensitivity to racial diversity or attitudes toward being involved in the community. Many educators, parents and local and state policy-makers think that schools should have goals beyond academic achievement. The authors agree.

To use an extreme example, even if a high school improves student achievement on a standardized or applied test by 25 percent, concerns probably should be expressed if that school loses 50 percent of its students over a two-year period. And certainly, schools should be expected to have goals regarding graduation rates.

Daily attendance also is important. One way to improve a school's test scores is to *encourage* certain students to miss school on testing days. The National Center on Educational Outcomes has found that one result of high stakes testing is that the percentage of students being tested goes down in some schools, and some states. (NCEO web site)

Some schools may wish to set goals regarding student behavior. For example, schools that enroll significant numbers, or percentages of students who have been involved in the juvenile justice system may wish to set a goal to reduce the number of their students who break the law. **Academy Charter School**, which serves a cross-

section of students in suburban Denver, set a goal that “the instances of second referrals for discipline problems will account for three percent or less of the entire student body.”

Some schools may have major problems with fighting or other forms of disruption. Some schools enroll significant numbers of students who in previous schools have been involved in fights. Such schools might well set goals for reducing student conflict.

Some schools set goals for parent and family involvement. Colorado’s **Academy Charter School** proposed that “parent and community involvement equal 20 percent or more of the entire staffing hours budgeted each year.” Some schools have set numerical goals specifying the number of hours contributed to the school, or the percentage of families which are involved in various ways with the school.

Overall, this project encourages schools to set a variety of goals, not just goals focusing on student achievement.

At the same time, schools ought to consider how many goals they set. Ted Sizer is perhaps the most prominent of many people who have questioned the wide range of goals that many schools set (Sizer). Sizer makes the point that many schools, particularly at the secondary level, opt for breadth, rather than depth. He urges secondary schools to have a relatively small number of goals, allowing them to focus. Establishing priorities makes it much more likely that goals will be met. This is true for individuals and for organizations, including schools.

Other Center for School Change research supports this idea. The center helped several secondary schools create graduation plans based on demonstrating skills and knowledge, rather than accumulation of credits. The center also interviewed schools around the nation that had based graduation on demonstrated skill or knowledge, rather than credits. Some of the schools interviewed have used such a system for more than 20 years. (Nathan, Power and Bruce) The strong recommendation of these schools was to limit the number of required skills and areas of competence. Without ignoring the range and array of knowledge available, these schools learned to focus on a relatively small number of areas that they require young people to demonstrate prior to graduation.

Charter schools and other schools held accountable for results may wish to consider this advice. It appears that depth, rather than breadth, has many advantages. This is not an argument for ignoring the vast array of knowledge currently available. It is an

argument for focus, and for recognition that doing a limited number of things well probably is better than doing a mediocre job in many areas.

Level of Goals

This issue involves a series of questions. For example, should all schools be expected to produce a certain level of achievement by a certain point in time? Many states and some districts have decided that the answer is “yes.” They require that students pass certain tests prior to graduation.

It is beyond the scope of this project to enter into the debate about statewide, standardized tests. State standards and tests vary widely. Some of the schools with which the project worked indicated that they deeply resent the enormous amount of time they feel is being devoted to preparation for these tests, which they feel do not adequately measure what the schools are trying to achieve. One of our consultants, a former chief state school officer, has argued that the technology of assessment currently is not sufficiently advanced to measure, in ways which can easily and conclusively be reduced to numbers, many of the qualities schools want to produce. (Ramirez) Moreover, he believes that effective use of applied forms of assessment is very costly. He questions whether many states currently are willing to pay the cost of these assessments.

Many of the schools participating in this project agreed that it is costly to conduct a strong assessment program. **Options for Youth**, for example, allocates 2.5 percent of its budget to assessment.

A Chicago report notes that local charter schools had to devote a significant amount of staff time to developing and refining performance assessments, even though they had the help of a consultant. “One simple lesson learned is that creating standards and assessments that are meaningful, rigorous, externally credible and manageable for staff is more complex and time-consuming than it seems.” (Leadership for Quality Education, p. 22).

Eventually, the participating schools narrowed their focus, and developed or refined just a few unique standards and assessments, to supplement standardized tests. But teachers felt the time they spent was worthwhile. As one teacher noted, “This is a lot of hard work, but it will forever nourish your teaching.” (Leadership for Quality Education, p. 31)

Beyond the statewide tests, schools can – and we believe should – suggest goals and assessment methods relevant to the students with whom they are working and the goals they have for their school. Several of the schools participating in this study have found ways, for example, to measure whether students are improving their public speaking skills. (This is a skill widely described as important by business and community groups.) Some schools ask students to speak several times during the year, and videotape their presentations. The schools train people – sometimes including students, parents and community members along with educators – to help assess the students’ speeches. While the results are not easily translated into national, state or local comparisons, they do allow the schools to measure whether students are making progress.

Should students in a school be expected to show progress toward a certain level of achievement over a certain time period? The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has defined student assessment as “the process of measuring the extent to which a school has improved the quality of student performance.” (NWREL, p. 53). The authors agree that part of any school’s assessment and accountability plan should measure whether students are making progress – whether they have more skills and knowledge than they did before they entered the school.

A school where students have very low scores on standardized or other forms of assessment should be expected to improve students’ performance. But what about a school where most of the students enter at a fairly high level of achievement? Should states or school districts adopt a standard percentage of expected improvement? This project suggests that the answer to this question is “No.” It is convenient to say, for example, “All schools are expected to show at least an average of five or 10 percent improvement over a period of three years.” But such a goal may be too low for certain schools where student performance averages are extremely low, and too high for other (already high performing) schools. So we urge that those responsible for setting expectations for schools establish some of them based on the situation at the individual school.

This leads to the key question: “How high should goals be set?” Setting the level of required accomplishment for students, and for schools, is one of the key decisions which state legislatures, school boards, other charter school sponsors and individual schools must make. Setting goals too low may lead to lower achievement than could be reached.

One of the central concerns some people are raising is that some schools and some districts have set standards too low. But setting goals too high may lead to frustration.

Earlier in the report, we offered examples of a number of goals that schools have set. For example, some schools feel they can and should be accountable for improving the average student's achievement by at least one year. Some schools feel their students enter with such low skills that they must improve achievement by more than one year for every year the student attends their school. There appears to be no simple, magic answer to the question of how high a goal or standard should be set.

Specificity of Goals

This report suggests that all schools have at least some clear, measurable goals. Some educators have been hesitant to be specific, feeling that this can trivialize education, and narrow the curriculum. Both problems can develop.

At the same time, it is difficult to know whether a school is achieving its goals and to measure progress if it is not possible to be clear about the goal. Our view is that schools ought to have some clear, measurable goals.

Should schools be expected to achieve all of their goals? Answering this question involves tradeoffs. No flexibility may lead schools to set low goals and to have fewer goals than they might otherwise propose. Too much flexibility may lead to the conclusion that although goals exist, there is little or no expectation that they need to be met. Neither situation is desirable.

One way to proceed is to establish a series of goals, but to build in some flexibility. For example, a school and the organization supervising or sponsoring the school may wish to say that there are certain goals that must be met or there will be negative consequences. A second list of goals can be developed, at least some of which might be met. This approach may provide valuable flexibility, along with some non-negotiable expectations. For example, a school might be expected to increase overall student achievement in at least two of the three *basic* areas of reading, writing and math by a certain percentage. A contract might also list several areas in which progress is expected. Once again, the contract might specify that progress will be expected in, for example, four of the six areas.

Another form of flexibility involves the percentage of students expected to meet certain goals. A school might say that at least 90 percent of students are expected to master a certain set of skills over a three-year period. A school might be expected to have at least 90 percent attendance over a three-year period. And a school might specify that it will have no more than 25 percent attrition over a certain time period. These are all examples of specific goals, which in turn do not require a school to be perfect.

Hugh Price, president of the National Urban League, recently suggested that every urban public school be given charter status. He recommended that if at least 75 percent of the students at a school did not meet agreed upon standards, the school would have to develop an improvement plan. "If students continue to falter, the charter is revoked."
(Sharp)

Schools using multi-age classrooms also need some flexibility from rigid grade-level state or local standards. Many schools have found that it's extremely valuable to have classrooms with students of two to three ages together. Two leading researchers cite the "substantial and generally favorable body of research" regarding what they call *nongradedness*. (Anderson and Pavin)

This is not an argument that all schools should adopt a modified one-room school-house model in which students of different ages learn together. However, there is strong support in research for this approach. And using this strategy does have implications for the kind of accountability plan and assessments that are used.

In a well-developed multi-age classroom, not all students of a certain age (say eight or 10) will necessarily master the same material. So schools of this kind should ask for and receive the opportunity to demonstrate that students have mastered certain skills, and gained certain knowledge by a certain point. Some flexibility is necessary if schools are to use this well-supported approach.

Training Needs

It is not nearly enough for one person, or a small group of people in a school, to agree about what is to be assessed and how assessment will take place. As former teacher, superintendent and chief state school officer Al Ramirez has written, professional skill and knowledge is of "vital importance" to the success of a strong assessment program.
(Ramirez, p. 207)

Ramirez praises an effort by Washington State to list and train educators in seven key assessment areas. These are:

- Teachers must understand and be able to describe the achievement expectations they believe are important for their students.
- Students must understand the various purposes of assessment in schools and how each purpose affects the quality of a student's schooling experience.
- Teachers must understand and be able to apply standards of technical quality to assessments.
- Teachers must identify an appropriate assessment method from among several available options and either select previously developed assessments or design and develop new assessments that fit the context.
- Teachers must store, retrieve, and communicate assessment results to users of that information in a timely manner and must work to ensure complete and accurate understanding of those results on the part of all relevant users.
- Teachers must know and be able to meet professional standards (fair, legal and ethical) in their classroom assessment practices.
- Teachers must understand and remain sensitive to the personal consequences of their assessments for students and their families. (Washington Commission on Student Learning)

Starting a new school – magnet, charter or whatever – is a vast, complex and time-consuming effort. It is vital for those creating such a school to build in the time and opportunity, before students arrive, for those working in the school to discuss, agree on, and learn how to carry out various approaches to student assessment. Good will is not enough. Educators must understand what is expected in terms of academic assessment, and have the skills necessary to carry out this assessment.

Moreover, if, as this report urges, the school decides to involve community members, parents and students in assessment, these people also need training. It would be extremely unwise to assume that community members, parents and students always agree what terms mean, or that they fully understand the assessment techniques educators have taken months to develop.

Thus, time must be set aside to provide training. And the schools participating in this project reported that training is not just a one-time event. New educators join the faculty,