FORUM

National Leaders Surveyed on Education Reform Movement

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Educational reform efforts of the last twenty years have resulted in two distinct national movements or tracks. The first track, which is focused on efforts to decentralize the public education bureaucracy, is characterized by site-based decision making, mastery of the basic skills, and educational choice or the voucher system. The second track is focused on efforts to standardize what is taught in the public schools. The most prominent components of this reform track are national standards and goals for students, a national system of examination for students, and a national certification process for teachers.

Although both tracks strive for increased educational accountability, the strategies being proposed to achieve this goal (such as a national system of performance-based examinations and educational choice programs) appear to be at opposite ends of the educational reform movement. As history shows us, however, juxtaposing reform efforts that would centralize the public school system with those that would lead to increased decentralization is not new in the ongoing debate over how schools will function and what students will learn.

History also shows us that this is not the first time federal and/or state governments have collaborated with national groups to effect change in the public education system, nor is it the first time for national events and trends to influence changes in our schools.

It is the first time, however, that these forces have acted in concert to implement comprehensive, nationally-defined policies and programs aimed at all levels of education. The interplay between the two reform movements is critical to the implementation of broad-based reforms.

The momentum and support for proposed education reform policies and programs are at an all-time high. However, as the two tracks continue to gain acceptance and converge on the public schools, there is a real possibility they will collide and inflict further damage on an already ailing public education system. If students or individual schools fail to perform at a predetermined level, the results could be used as additional rationale to argue that the public education system is no longer viable.

To develop perspectives of how these and similar policy questions might be viewed, a survey of 98 national leaders was conducted during the winter of 1991. Leaders representing business and foundations, civil and human rights organizations, and education and policy-making groups (both governmental and nongovernmental) were included in the survey sample.

The fundamental finding of this survey is that the national leaders strongly believe it is likely that four major national education reform agendas-national standards and goals, a national system of examinations, a national teachers' certification process, and a national curriculum-will be implemented. Further, the surveyed leaders believe that implementation of these agendas will result in increased standardization of the core curriculum and centralization of the administration of public schools.

National Standards and Goals

The surveyed leaders support requiring public schools to conform to national standards and goals, and agree that the National Education Goals established by President Bush and the nation's governors in 1989 should be national priorities. However, the respondents also overwhelmingly believe it is unlikely that the goals will be achieved by the year 2000 as proposed.

National Testing

With the exception of national examination scores being used to assess schools or compare student achievement across districts or states, the respondents opposed using results for other high-stakes purposes such as grade promotion, graduation from high school, employment decisions, and determination of teacher salaries.

Teacher Certification

Although the national leaders believe that there may be more standardization of the curriculum and, perhaps, more centralization of the public education system, they do not necessarily believe the implementation of these reforms will dramatically improve the quality of education for all students, especially minority students and students in poor school districts. The surveyed leaders agreed that board certified teachers will teach at all academic abilities. However, they did not believe that these teachers will be employed in poor school districts. Nor did they believe that ethnic minority teachers and teachers from low-income districts would tend to be board certified. If these findings become reality, the instructional disparities within the education system could widen.

Core Curriculum

A strong majority of the surveyed leaders also supports the optional rather than mandatory use of a national core curriculum and a system of examinations in the public schools. While this probably reflects support for the viewpoint of local and state control of education, survey results suggest that these national leaders believe that implementation of national reforms will likely result in a more standardized core curriculum and increased centralization of the public education system. Approximately 69 percent of the national leaders surveyed believe a more standardized curriculum will result if the four national reform initiatives are implemented; 53 percent believe the public education system will become more centralized. The civil and human rights and education leaders surveyed were more certain of these outcomes than leaders from businesses, foundations, and policy-making organizations.

These findings could reflect the belief among national leaders that the United States already has a de facto national curriculum and that reforms will further solidify efforts to shift to a de jure national curriculum. On the other hand, acceptance of a national curriculum may not, in the national leaders' opinion, necessitate changing the political structure of schooling from a decentralized to a centralized system.