Policy and Performance

How board policy can drive student achievement

BY WILLIAM H. STREICH

Effective with the eighth-grade class of 2002, every eighth-grade student in the school district shall successfully complete a course in algebra.

If your school board is concerned with student achievement, you might well be considering a policy like this one. On the surface, the proposal looks good: Research shows the correlation between algebra and students' later success, so it makes sense to increase students' chances of success by requiring them to complete successfully a course in algebra in the eighth grade.

But critics stand ready to jump all over this proposal. Teachers predict many students will fail; counselors warn the dropout rate will increase; coaches and boosters complain that high school athletic programs will be weakened because some players will fail the higher math courses and lose their eligibility. Because some general and business math teachers aren't qualified to teach algebra, you can expect teacher grievances to be filed. The cost of teacher training, curriculum revisions, and extra tutoring might be enough to make you wish you had stuck with less complicated issues, like developing a policy on cheerleader selection or deciding whether to move the prom from the high school to a hotel.

Many boards do choose to stick with these simpler issues. In my years as an administrator and a consultant, I have found that board members often profess their interest in improving academic achievement for all students, but seldom commit themselves to adopting policy on the subject.

Yet policy is the most powerful tool a board can use to improve the academic performance of the students under its jurisdiction. Policy sets the course of action for a school district: It guides present and future decisions of the superintendent, the faculty, the staff, parents, and the board itself. Policy states what shall be accomplished and, at times, what processes shall be used to accomplish it.

Policies of excellence

Policies have wide-ranging effects. To get the most impact out of a policy that is aimed at improving academic performance, I recommend crafting the policy carefully and assessing it against these criteria of excellence:

1. Does the policy directly call for measurable improvement in student academic achievement?

2. Does the policy focus on student learning outcomes—that is, the knowledge, skills, or proficiencies that students are expected to acquire?

3. Does the policy require measuring and reporting (to both the board and the community) student performance on tests and assessments, enrollment figures, and other measures of student achievement?

4. Does the policy provide for continued and substantial improvement in student academic performance over time, with a continuing emphasis on staff development and special training of new hires?

5. Does the policy cover *all* students, not just the "smart kids"?

If you can answer yes to each of these questions, you're off to a good start. But you still need to double-check your policies for vagueness, which can make results difficult to measure.

A typical technology policy, for instance, instructs schools "to use technology to enhance teaching and learning," "to provide equal access to the Internet for every child," or "to use technology to promote learning." The goals sound lofty, but how can you tell whether students are really learning to use computers intelligently or whether they possess computer competencies?

A better policy might be:

By the completion of grades six, eight, and 10, all students will demonstrate proficiencies in computer skills and in the intelligent application of those skills to the curriculum.

Accountability can come in the policy regulations for administrators. The policy regulations in this case, for instance, might specify:

Each sixth-grade student shall word-process (grammar-check, spell-check, and print) a five-paragraph essay that meets established criteria of excellence related to

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his or her study of world history. Sixth-graders will also use or create a world-history database, create charts and/or graphs, and write a brief report showing what they learned. Effective with the sixth-graders in 2002-03, the superintendent shall report out the numbers of sixth-graders meeting this policy standard and the progress on the program.

This policy and the related regulations call for students to learn basic computer skills and apply them to the curriculum in work that integrates writing and social studies learning. The board will need to support this learning—by providing the necessary computers in each sixth-grade classroom and making computers available before and after school. After-school lessons in keyboarding and computer skills might be necessary in fifth grade as well. Proof of the policy's success should be as clear as the word-processed essays the students produce.

Other policy principles

In addition to checking your policies for vagueness and measuring them against the criteria for excellence, your board can follow these guidelines, which focus policy on academic performance:

• *Set high standards for every student.* Expectations must be high for curriculum, instruction, and student motivation. Curriculum—what students are to learn in school—is the *raison d'être* of local boards and frequently their most neglected task. Your schools cannot achieve high academic performance without a high-quality curriculum. Consider "downgrading" the present curriculum—that is, teaching challenging, rigorous curriculum topics at lower grade levels. Or consider adopting a more challenging program, maybe by replacing tired K-5 texts with a hands-on science program.

• *Improve instruction.* If you want all students to meet high curriculum goals, you must be prepared to support learning with improved instruction. This means providing training to improve teachers' pedagogical skills. If you want all students to be prepared for eighth-grade algebra, for instance, you'll have to revise the math program in the elementary schools and train teachers in the new program so students can begin working toward that goal.

In order to meet high standards, students need administrators and teachers who know both content and pedagogy. For example, all elementary teachers need a background that includes undergraduate and graduate courses in world history, American history, literature, and advanced math. Science teachers need to update what they learned in biology courses 25 years ago. Policies must encourage and require teachers and administrators to acquire knowledge about new content information, as well as instructional techniques. This is the learning of teachers, administrators, and staff in a learning organization.

• *Improve student motivation.* Student motivation is as critical as curriculum and instruction. This is the reason for the universal appeal of involving parents in schools and in their child's learning. But boards must go beyond that and accept responsibility for motivating students to learn the more rigorous curriculum—by using students' interests (and social interests), by selecting motivating curriculum experiences, by applying learning to real life, and by applying computers to learning.

• *Align with excellence.* Everything in the district—personnel policies, professional development policies, text adoption, curriculum development, budgeting, parent communication, guidance services, and so on—should be aligned with the goal of high academic achievement for all children. Your district's mission statement probably includes a statement referring to a goal of high academic achievement, but every policy should also be directed toward that goal. This alignment should even affect objectives for future labor contract negotiations.

• *Ratchet up performance.* A ratchet is a mechanism with teeth that allows movement in only one direction—and that's exactly what school districts need to improve student performance. Schools should start with achievable goals and gradually ratchet up to higher goals. If 10 percent of graduates successfully pass a course in physics, why can't 20 percent or 40 percent or even more pass the course in the future?

Ratcheting allows you to reach goals at a reasonable and realistic pace. Maybe your board would like every student to complete a laboratory course in biology, chemistry, and physics. But setting that as an immediate goal probably requires more curriculum development, lab space, and staff changes than a typical school can handle immediately. Consider starting by requiring laboratory biology for everyone, then chemistry, and finally physics.

• *Raise both the floor and the ceiling.* Your goal as a board member should be improved achievement for *all* students—the swift, the struggling, and those in between. You raise the floor by eliminating all lower-level eighth-grade math courses as students begin to take algebra. (Students might need summer-school programs and after-school programs.) You raise the ceiling when you offer talented math students the opportunity to take algebra *and* geometry while they are still in middle school. In order to support both low performers and high performers, you might need to provide tutors and advanced study groups.

A singular purpose

Everyone wants to improve education, but we sometimes forget what education reform is about. It is *not* about site-based school councils, national certification for experienced teachers, national curriculum standards, Goals 2000, certification standards for administrators and teachers, charter schools, vouchers, authentic and performance assessment, or even increased spending for education.

Each of these strategies might bring some improvements to a district. But if your school board wants every student to achieve a high level of academic performance, you need to adopt policies that focus the district's work on that singular purpose—and transform the district's mission statement into a mission. ❖