ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM:
ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION IN THE POLICY WORKSHOP

PREPARED FOR:
Office of the Governor

AUTHOR:
Terry Peterson

State of South Carolina
1986
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Assessment of Educational Reform: Issues for Discussion in The Policy Workshop

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In the past few years, most states have increased standards for students, teachers and/or principals and/or have taken other initiatives to hopefully improve the public schools. Naturally, the educational community and public want to know to what extent these initiatives have made a difference, either collectively or individually. In a number of these states, the reforms have resulted in major new investments in education. Taxpayers want to know to what extent these investments are paying dividends.

Some "watchers" of the latest reform movement contend that certain segments of students may not be helped by the recent reforms. While some contend that immediate results are demanded, others argue years will be necessary to see the results. Some say the desired results, such as improved basic skills, are too narrow while many employers feel competencies in the basic skills are essential. Some promoters of the reforms feel that current methods of renorming tests, procedures for reporting data and stipulations on findings make it virtually impossible to show success.
Business leaders in many states have been part of the educational reform effort. Because of business interest in education, it may be useful to look at their approach to assessing success. Their approach in determining success is normally an assessment of whether or not the year was profitable and how did that profit (or loss) compare to the previous year's profit (or loss).

Successes in the educational or non-profit world are not as quantifiable. In addition, it appears that common practices in educational assessment make determining success difficult. Let's look at an example in the business world and one in the educational world.

Our nation has experienced an inflationary environment for years. In an inflationary environment, increases in income for many businesses, under normal circumstances, has approximated inflation. In an environment of 5% inflation, a business may typically demonstrate a 5% increase in income, costs and as a result, profits (Chart I). In most cases, a 5% increase in profit would indicate a successful year. Yet, when inflation is 5%, a 5% increase in profits may actually be no change in profits when corrected for real buying power. As a result, one key indicator of business success, the change in profits, may
require no real change to be successful. Of course, maintaining a profitable position under adverse circumstances, i.e., foreign imports, is success even in inflationary times.

In some educational assessments, instead of riding an "inflation float," a "deflator" is actually built in. For example, percentile ranks are often used in educational assessment. For a school, district or state to show improvement in percentile rank as an age group moves from one grade to the next, students must answer a significant number of additional questions correct (Chart II) to hold their same relative percentile rank. This situation probably creates an automatic "deflator" against success.

Other examples of building in "deflators" to educational success also exist. If rapid success in experienced in educational achievement, there is a tendency to renorm norm-referenced tests, set higher acceptable performance on criterion tests, increase the difficulty of items and/or include more objectives on higher level skills. Naturally, the year any of these changes are implemented, many schools, districts or states may show a major drop in performance relative to the new norm, standards or increased difficulty while in reality their performance may be higher than past years' norms, standards or
items. In addition, such changes often make longitudinal analyses virtually impossible due to non-comparable data. By eliminating longitudinal comparisons, an easily understandable method of showing success is eliminated.

How can these problems be overcome but yet give the public, including the business community, a fair assessment of educational reforms?

Given these and other concerns, what factors should be evaluated, what amount of gain (reduction) should constitute success and what reporting methodologies should be used when assessing educational reforms?

South Carolina and other states, including Colorado, have taken a multifaceted approach to assessing its massive educational reform efforts. This approach uses multiple indicators for various factors and reports the results in various degrees of detail and formats. Such an approach appears to meet, at least in part, the desire for assessment results of recent educational reforms.
### CHART I

**Income, Costs and Profit for a Business**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1984</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
<th>Percent Change In Real Dollars*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>$1,000,000</td>
<td>$1,050,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs</td>
<td>900,000</td>
<td>945,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>$105,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A good year? Was it really?*

*5% Inflation*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2nd Grade</th>
<th>Third Grade</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentile Rank</td>
<td>50th</td>
<td>50th</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>No Progress?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Scores</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>+88</td>
<td>Good Progress?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale Scores</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>645</td>
<td>+12</td>
<td>Good Progress?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHART III

Relative Position to "New" and "Old" Norms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentile Rank</th>
<th>&quot;New&quot; Norms</th>
<th>&quot;Old&quot; Norms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50th (1986)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50th (1977)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30th (1977)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>