

## Compliance and School Leadership

Today, local effectiveness in academic leadership is often measured in terms of how compliant educational professionals are in acceding to externally imposed standards, meeting accreditation mandates for achieving certain program *targets*, and causing students to perform well on high stakes tests.

It is particularly ironic that American public school systems, known around the world for their autonomy and emphasis on local decision-making, have been converted into agents of state and federal bureaucracies. Local districts began losing autonomy with court decisions declaring school inequities in states like Kentucky. Now that loss of autonomy can be seen in the most recent imposition of No Child Left Behind mandates for schools and districts that accept federal assistance. Compliance at the local level, once limited to safety issues, building codes, student health, fiscal management, personnel management, and other operational conditions, is now associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of student learning. Since the mid-1990s the word and idea of *compliance* has been on top of everyone's *school improvement* agenda.

This E-Hint isn't meant to discuss the relative merits of the compliance movement, because hundreds of articles and analyses reviewing the pros and cons are already available. The purpose of this article is to offer suggestions on how to think and act when bureaucratic compliance seems to overwhelm us.

### **To what are educators being asked to comply?**

In the areas of curriculum, instruction, and student learning local educators are primarily being asked to comply with requirements associated with: (1) developing and using a database for tracking student progress and making program adjustments as the data indicate, (2) summatively assessing students in prescribed or selected subject (target) areas, accomplished in most states through use of externally developed high stakes tests, and (3) providing assurance that every teacher is fully qualified according to state and/or professional standards. Ramifications associated with those compliance elements include becoming fully acquainted with established state and/or national standards, and skills necessary to locally interpret those standards in ways that make them useful and appropriate to the curriculum and individual classroom instruction.

### **Is compliance with external requirements the sum total of *school improvement*?**

The answer to that question is clearly "no." The processes described above merely constitute the tip of the iceberg. Those processes are tools through which a bureaucracy can hold schools accountable in the context it understands and can actually manage. They are a means for causing schools to focus more on curriculum, instruction, assessment of

student learning, and program evaluation. None of us can argue with the development and use of a database, or ensuring that teachers are fully qualified to teach their assigned subjects. Those are tasks we should have been doing all along. In fact, there is little argument with the use of subject standards as guidelines for improving local curriculum.

The biggest problem with the new compliance movement is the assumption that a local curriculum should be **explicitly** driven by written standards, benchmarks, and indicators interpreted by those who create, administer, and grade high stakes tests. Such practice is based on these points: (1) a narrowing of the curriculum (what students will know or do) to elements that appear on some sort of written and standardized examination that is formatted for easy grading, (2) the exclusive use of disaggregated data generated by such examinations to identify program deficiencies, and (3) creation of single-dimension strategies that will overcome those deficiencies. It's already obvious that the notion of school improvement as being compliance with particular indicators and practices is limited for these reasons:

- Narrowing the curriculum to those knowledge and skill areas that can be measured on annually administered high stakes tests tends to exclude the kinds of scholarship that are more qualitatively measured using formative assessments. It can eliminate or minimize such *mastery* considerations as reflective thought, application, transfer, and problem solving. Moreover, while the accreditation process continues to build there is an overemphasis on target subjects that are typically included in the academic core. Given less consideration are subjects associated with fine arts, vocational studies, and health and physical education.
- The exclusive use of disaggregated data, generated by high stakes examinations to identify program deficiencies, leads to the possible use of curricular "band-aids." In other words, educational leaders may think it's easier to identify and apply a quick fix to a problem than to actually work toward more holistic approaches to curriculum improvement and enhanced forms of staff development. That single-dimension strategy can be so pervasive that other aspects of program development are ignored.

### **How can school leaders be proactive change agents while also being in compliance with bureaucratic directives?**

Districts that use the Curriculum Leadership Institute's model for decision-making and action-taking have organizational processes and tools to make school improvement more holistic and inclusive. The primary vehicle for that kind of school improvement is the district-level body responsible for curriculum, instruction and student learning. Regardless of whether it's called a curriculum council, school leadership team, or something else, that body of representative stakeholders is responsible for overseeing the big picture. It provides direction to subordinate pre-K-12 groups we call subject area committees, and they accept responsibility for making systemic and systematic improvements in **all** aspects of the academic program.

We suggest that a dynamic district-level council or team can be responsible for seeking, receiving, and using all kinds of data on student performance and growth (not simply those generated by high stakes tests). Actions taken by that body – based on a regular analysis of incoming information – can and should be more than simple band-aids to correct deficiencies. They should entail a comprehensive effort to continuously improve every element of the academic program.

Proactive academic leadership is a practice that puts a school or district in front of the limitations associated with mere compliance. A well functioning system of decision-making groups that operate under a clear set of organizational policies, can make compliance with bureaucratic goals just one way to stimulate quality student learning.