

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

Educational Accountability in a New Era of Federal Involvement with American Schools

As this E-Hint is being written, we Americans are embarking on a new phase of how our national government will involve itself with public and private school management and day-to-day improvements. The No Child Left Behind version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 is likely to be modified in ways no one now understands, especially those in the U.S. Congress who will oversee the development and implementation of whatever comes next. The "*whatever comes next*" part will likely have much to do with the Obama Administration's promise to "transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age."

Here are a few of the new president's comments regarding education during his campaign:

- "We should not be forced to spend the academic year preparing students to fill in bubbles on standardized tests."
- We need to use "a broader range of assessments that can evaluate higher-order skills, including students' abilities to use technology, conduct research, engage in scientific investigation, solve problems, present and defend their ideas."
- "Labeling a school and its students as failures one day and then throwing your hands up and walking away from them the next is wrong."
- "Forcing our teachers, our principals, and our schools to accomplish all of this without the resources they need is wrong."

Those comments are clues about where the Obama Administration and Congress may take us in the next four years. We in the Curriculum Leadership Institute are most interested in the point made in the second bullet above, as that perspective strikes at the heart of what schools must demonstrate to be truly accountable to its students, their future employers, their communities, and the larger society they will join as adults.

The ramifications of the president's description of quality assessments can be aligned with the *backward design* model offered by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, the founders of Understanding by Design. Clearly, if an assessment includes a student's ability to defend ideas, then state standards, local curriculum, and instructional processes must prepare students for that kind of performance.

In almost every state, one can find schools that are now focused on the teaching of isolated state indicators for the purpose of helping students succeed with high stakes tests. These schools will find the new perspective daunting indeed. The new perspective has everything to do with a thoroughly scholastic engagement of teachers, students, and the school's supportive infrastructure. While the mastery of factoids,

formulas, and incidental pieces of knowledge will continue to be important, they will play only a supportive role in helping students become cognitively, scholastically and even emotionally engaged in the real world of inquiry and creative effort.

The Curriculum Leadership Institute is comfortable with the expected new direction provided by the Obama Administration. The CLI's comprehensive model for improving academic decision-making and action-taking has long been focused on organizational dynamics, which provides for the inclusion of teachers in all processes associated with program development, implementation and maintenance.

Years ago the CLI, in the absence of clear and definite external standards, indicated that "*accountability was allegiance to a collegially prepared and implemented mission.*" That definition is still valid today, and is actually the foundation used by various accreditation organizations. For example, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) emphasizes the importance of a mission or intended learning goals via its *conceptual framework*. All NCATE approved institutions must prove that they have a good conceptual framework, and that it is assertively and meticulously used in the development and implementation of all course syllabi.

Using that context, we believe that a school district should have a clear mission/conceptual framework (what students must know and do to successfully complete the academic program). The district's infrastructure should be capable of supporting that mission with:

1. an effective curriculum that is aligned with state standards,
2. the use of multiple instructional practices aligned with the curriculum,
3. assessments that are aligned with the curriculum and the instructional practices, and
4. data from multiple sources to show student success.

Each teacher in the district is responsible for providing input into the development of the above four areas, and personal evidence of all four as related to his or her classroom. Building-level administrators are responsible for facilitating teacher efforts in all four areas, providing building profiles of the evidence, and assuring ongoing communication among the building's community members, the building staff, and district-level personnel. Central office administrators are responsible for creating district-level profiles of the four areas. They are also responsible for establishing and maintaining a governance system that operates through a decision-making body composed of representatives of all district educators, the board of education, and the community. This body oversees progress and makes decisions regarding the four areas listed above, and facilitates communication among all buildings and the communities they serve.