

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 136

EA 027 241

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 TITLE AEIS Policy vs. Site-Based Management: Research Agenda Implications.  
 PUB DATE Jan 94  
 NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association (San Antonio, TX, January 1994).  
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; \*Accountability; Action Research; Critical Theory; \*Decentralization; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Evaluation Methods; Local Government; Local Issues; \*Participatory Research; \*School Based Management; State School District Relationship  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Academic Excellence Indicator System; \*Texas

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the problems of centralized academic-indicator systems in light of the move toward site-based management. Problems with current practice are examined in the framework of critical inquiry. Alternatives to current accountability guidelines are presented that harmonize positivism with critical inquiry, while respecting both local and state needs for accountability information. The paper uses a focused synthesis methodology (Majcharzak 1984) of policy research to examine the paradox of "statist-centralized" data collection (Clune 1993) in the presence of decentralized decision making. The Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), a centralized assessment device, and its role as an economic model for school assessment are described. The paper next discusses the legislative incarnation of Texas' site-based management, followed by a discussion on how local management can ameliorate problems associated with employing a strictly economic model of school assessment. Finally, recommendations are offered for conducting research practices at the local level that respect the value-laden nature of local needs while continuing to embrace a positivistic approach that appeases major stakeholders. A conclusion is that the AEIS can provide only snapshot data for Texas schools. The information gleaned from the AEIS data provide general direction for educational improvement, but do little to guide specific interventions at the classroom level. Site-based management creates a forum for local practitioners to gather and discuss, through critical inquiry, the creation and validation of locally developed measures of student success. (Contains 14 references.) (LMI)

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AEIS Policy vs. Site-Based Management:

Research Agenda Implications

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the  
Southwest Educational Research Association  
January 27-29, 1994, San Antonio, Texas

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the problems of centralized academic indicator systems in light of thrusts toward site management of schools. Problems with current practice are examined in the framework of critical inquiry. Alternatives to current accountability guidelines are presented which harmonize positivism with critical inquiry, while respecting both local and state needs for accountability information.

## Introduction

This paper examines the conflict between centralized school assessment and thrusts toward site-management and draws implications for local research agendas. Decentralized decision-making in public schools has taken the country by storm. Texas is no exception to this trend where, in 1991, site-based management was signed into law. In contrast, the manner in which schools are held accountable for their performance remains highly centralized. The Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) is a top-down mandated set of school performance elements. As such, the success of any localized effort to improve education is judged by 67 state-mandated indicators, only 27 of which are directly related to student performance. In spite of concerted efforts to assess performance in the 1,054 school districts in Texas, the results of the AEIS becomes "filtered unpredictably through multiple intermediate layers of discretion shaped by preexisting cultures and agendas." (Clune, 1993, p. 234)

I use a focused synthesis methodology (Majcharzak,

1984) of policy research to examine the paradox of "statist-centralized" data collection (Clune, 1993) in the presence of decentralized decision making. First I describe the AEIS as a centralized assessment device and how it fits into an economic model for school assessment. Next I discuss the legislative incarnation of Texas' site-based management, followed by a discussion on how it can ameliorate problems associated with employing a strictly economic model of school assessment. Finally I make recommendations for research practices at the local level which respect the value-laden nature of local needs while still embracing a positivistic approach that appeases major stakeholders.

#### **The AEIS as Production-Function**

Many states have adopted high-stakes student testing, extending the application of the production-function paradigm in school accountability. High stakes tests play to the outcomes side of this model, as minimum standards of student performance result in rewards or consequences. For state policy makers this approach permits the use of an economic model to assess

schools. Ferguson's treatise for "how and why money matters" (1991, p 465) in education in the *Harvard Journal on Legislation* is an example of this kind of approach. Using data aggregated at school, district, and state levels, outcomes such as test scores (Dolan & Schmidt, 1987; Sebold & Dato, 1981) are measured against various inputs, such as expenditures and student characteristics.

The AEIS is such an accountability measure, describing student ability on fourteen dependent variables. When linked with independent variables related to student demographics, the AEIS report spans sixty-seven columns across a spreadsheet window. The major student-related dependent variables, as recommended to the State Board of Education for 1992-93 and beyond, are:

- Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) % Passing
- Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) % Mastery
- Physical Fitness and Health
- Computer Literacy
- Second Language Proficiency
- Norm-referenced Assessment Program

- Texas Academic Skills Program (predicted success)
- Graduation Rate
- Advanced Course Completion
- Student Attendance
- Promotion/Retention
- SAT/ACT Scores
- Completion of Recommended Preparatory Program
- Dropout Rate

The student-related independent variables are: ethnicity, whether or not the student is "limited-English proficient, if a student is considered from a "low-income" family, and whether the student is expected to attend college or not.

To compare campuses to themselves over time, and different campuses to each other, the state uses a strictly positivistic approach, engaging in what any educational research text will tell you is correlational research (eg: McMillan & Schumacher, 1986).

In an extreme example that approaches social Darwinism, the state has held all school buildings accountable to high stakes sanctions based on only one variable (Scharrer, 1993), percentage of students

passing all three portions of the TAAS test. Holding a vast number of schools, ostensibly charged with their own destiny, to such a restricted list of factors dismisses local level capabilities to conduct research on "what works."

While the state has a legitimate need to collect accountability data, current evaluation practices stifle the development of innovative methods of self-study by school personnel. True, the current set of AEIS indicators can do a good job of providing a "snapshot" or "yearbook picture" of how schools are doing, but they do little in the way of describing how classroom practice needs to change to improve the schools that are having a "bad-hair day" when their picture is taken. Knowledge that is verified by snapshots of complex issues have a focus that is much too simple and narrow. Annual reports that emanate from systems such as the AEIS are devoid of the context needed to comprehend the complexities of the classroom. Further, it would be remiss to prescribe from this data generalizable procedures for effective teaching (Kincheloe, 1991).

### Problems with Production-Function Approaches

Monk (1993) notes that this research remains as "fundamentally primitive black-box formulations where analysts have made little progress toward modeling what makes education distinct from other types of productions more typically studied using production function techniques (Monk, 1993 p. 309)." One problem is that traditional indicators (gender, socio-economic status, etc.) do not lend themselves to this type of assessment. Further, Rivlin (1973) finds it is difficult to extricate the variance of student input in measured outcomes. Where, then, should outcomes analyses take place? Senge notes that "learning to see underlying structures rather than events is a starting point..." (1990, p. 65). By using a lens of critical inquiry, greater latitude could to be granted to local practitioners to set a research agenda respecting the value-laden nature of local needs while still embracing a positivistic approach that appeases major stakeholders. This is where the infrastructure of site-based management provides a platform for local research agendas to validate local indicators of student success.

**Site Based Management: What's Critical Inquiry  
got to do with It?**

Site based management is a legislated practice in Texas. In May of 1991 House Bill 2885 mandated that each school shall develop and implement a plan for site-based decision making. However, in spite of this legislated freedom, many teachers and administrators feel free to vary curriculum and methods only to the extent that it improves centralized accountability measures. As such, data on "what works" tends only to come from annual AEIS reports. Greater mechanisms need to be in place that provide a climate of self scrutiny on the part of the local schools. While it is paradoxical that the state dictates local decision-making procedures, they are the first to admit to it. For the Texas Education Agency, site-based decision making "...is the message that it is the business of local communities and their respective school systems to determine how educational programs will be structured -- and that the state's role is to establish the standards for performance, determine district accountability with

respect to state standards, and coordinate technical support to assist local districts in their efforts to improve students performance. (TEA, 1992, p 1.3)"

This paradox remains a difficult alliance. It is the business of determining how local educational programs will be structured - through local research efforts - that I wish to address. As noted above, the AEIS does little to provide local educational agencies with information on how to improve instructional practice. I believe that the infrastructure of site-based management in every Texas school provides an excellent platform upon which tenets of critical inquiry may be used to begin a process of local institutional research on the part of teachers and principals. Site-based management forces local practitioners to gather regularly to discuss all aspects of their educational program. At these meetings agendas can be set to examine locally developed indicators that may explain student success.

#### **Critical Inquiry and Practitioners as Researchers**

Kincheloe (1991) and Lytle & Cochran-Smith (1992) use tenets of critical inquiry to support the notion

that local school practitioners can and should conduct and disseminate research. By conducting research on the local level, practitioners can fill the gaps left by centralized snapshots of their schools. Teachers and principals are able to examine locally relevant variables that may explain student success with greater clarity than traditional independent variables such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Questions about student dignity and happiness may be introduced, as could forays into the control of the conceptualization of teachers' work (Kincheloe, 1991). Thus practitioner research is a way of generating both local knowledge and public knowledge about teaching and learning. According to Lytle & Cochran-Smith, teacher research is a systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work. The term systematic refers to ordered ways of "recollecting, rethinking, and analyzing classroom events" (p. 450); "intentional" means that research is a planned activity.

The nature of practitioner research can take on many forms. Lytle & Cochran-Smith proposed four categories of school practitioner research, ranging from

teachers' journals, brief and book length essays on classroom and school analysis, oral inquiries and discussions, and finally large small and larger scale studies not unlike university based classroom research.

### **Locally Developed Measures**

I am arguing here, drawing upon Clune's (1992) notion for a split level indicator system, and Kincheloe's (1991) and Lytle & Cochran-Smith's (1992) notions of teacher research capabilities that there is both value in, and need for, the development of what I call "locally developed measures." Locally developed measures are academic indicators that are determined and validated by teachers and principals at the building level (or at the district level if appropriate, i.e., small districts) and are recognized by the state as part of an academic excellence indicator system. I believe it is in the best interest of the state education agency to support, encourage, and call for local education agencies to propose and validate locally developed measures of student success. The research methodologies utilized can vary according to the researcher. Approaches advocated by Kincheloe (1991) and Lytle &

Cochran-Smith (1992) are qualitative in nature. While there is great value in qualitative methodologies, methodological monism is not the answer to any question. I support Francis Schrag in saying, "let a hundred methodological flowers bloom" (1992 p 16). Policies that allow local schools and districts to report site-based data based on locally developed and approved research agendas will enhance education by:

- acknowledging the importance of local relevance to school improvement assessment;
- acknowledging the professionalism of local practitioners;
- enhancing the database of assessment and improvement indicators; and
- provide rich opportunities for colleges of education to partner with schools to conduct research through research courses.

#### **Constraints and Enablers to Sanctioning Local Agendas**

The workload placed upon district research offices is already burgeoning in the wake of modifications and

additions to the AEIS and state testing schedules. Answering the call to the state's centralized data needs is a formidable task. This is just one constraint to successfully sanctioning local research agendas in a thousand school districts in Texas. Another constraint is the presence of the cult of the expert. It is difficult to convince those blessed with society's credentials that unadorned educators should be granted the power to generate new knowledge. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a colleague on the subject of empowering teachers to conduct their own research: "Yes, but do you really think they can do it?" my colleague remarked.

There are, however, enablers to the sanctioning of locally developed measures. The organizational structure to deliver practitioner training currently exists. Colleges and universities are in a perfect position to re-tool pre-service programs that stress professional development and the use of technology for the purpose of site-based research. In Texas, some programs are already in place, such as the Center for Pedagogy at the University of Texas at El Paso, one of

several centers for professional development funded by the Texas Education Agency. These centers, which already stress explicit linkages with public schools through off campus teaching and common training in computer technology, could easily incorporate relevant research sequences that stress methods appropriate for the creation and validation of locally developed measures.

#### **Summary and Conclusions**

The AEIS can only provide snapshot data at best for the schools of Texas. The information gleaned from the AEIS data provide general direction for educational improvement, but does little to guide specific interventions at the classroom level. Site-based management creates a forum for local practitioners to gather and discuss, through critical inquiry, the creation and validation of locally developed measures of student success. There are those that believe it is misguided to train teachers to conduct research that helps improve student outcomes on centralized goals (Elliot, 1989). They believe that this contradicts the

true purpose of critical inquiry. Nonetheless, the road to true local empowerment must begin somewhere. As long as the state continues to fund education, it will be difficult to wrestle all educational control to the local level. Any amount of critical reflection and participation by local actors regarding educational improvement is a step in the right direction.

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