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Phillip A. Cusick and Jennifer Borman

It has oft been said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and such is surely the case with much education reform legislation. Dissatisfied with the quality of student learning, the Michigan legislature decreed in 1993 that the state's language arts curriculum would be governed by a published set of standards. The education community responded; but what began as a mandate for improved student achievement, turned into a set of guidelines that may have made matters worse.

It is a cautionary tale.

What Happened

In response to the legislature's call for an improved academic core curriculum, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) created the Michigan English Language Arts Framework (MELAF) project. The legislation called for high standards. The curriculum was to be linked to testing at the 4th, 7th, and 11th grades. Students would be awarded a state-endorsed diploma on the basis of performance. School certification would depend on student performance and there would be consequences for schools that consistently failed.

Implementation of the mandate fell to a single office within the MDE, and that's where the disconnection between the standards and the law began. The MDE K-12 Language Arts Coordinator called on a group of educators who had for some years been networking on curricular issues. They were mostly adherents of the same set of ideas about language arts, i.e., the "best practice" concepts that colleges of education and professional societies had been promoting for years. Not surprisingly, they produced a set of standards that did little more than translate the group's educational views into state-disseminated guidelines.

The State Board of Education chose to accept but not endorse their recommendation, leaving only a set of guidelines that could be followed or ignored at the option of individual school districts. Even that degree of Board acceptance required the addition of two strong statements to the document:

- All students will read and comprehend general technical material;
- All students will demonstrate the ability to write clear and grammatically correct sentences paragraphs, and compositions.

At issue in this story is how the implementation process undermined legislative intent and what steps might be taken to head off this common problem.

Why it Happened

By calling on a colleague from the University of Michigan and other likeminded educators, the MDE's K-12 Language Arts coordinator initiated a scenario that virtually assured the opposite of the result-oriented changes intended by the legislature.

Funded by a \$1.5 million US Department of Education (USDOE) grant, the working group was able to proceed independently and with little legislative oversight, thus, it is not surprising that they injected their shared views of teaching and learning into the product. To the group, MELAF was an opportunity to gain sanction for their views.

The initial standards submitted to the State Board of Education (SBE) in 1994 were an unambiguous expression of the working group's "best practice" concepts. They were founded on the constructivist doctrine that the "meaning" of text is something that the reader creates through the filter of his or her own experience, i.e. meaning is a matter of personal interpretation. The legislature's intent, by contrast, was to develop a set of standards to which reading and writing can be compared and judged as good or bad, high or low, correct or incorrect. Plainly, the legislature and the working group were not on the same page.

In addition, the MELAF's standards were stated in terms of process, not product. The proposal used words such as "understand, explore, view, use, develop, and monitor" rather than "students will know," "students will read," or "students will write." Heavily biased toward multiculturalism, romanticism, and individual expression, those ideological perspectives – rather than measured student achievement – became the focus.

When presented to the SBE in 1994, the MELAF proposal was met with harsh criticism for vagueness as to what students should learn, and for its failure to specify performance measurements. However, given that the MDE had a legislative mandate, and MELAF had a contract with the USDOE, there was little choice other than to permit the MELAF to revise the document under the supervision of the MDE.

As a result, several changes were made – mainly ones addressing the offending semantics, not the content – and they were resubmitted. In frustration, the SBE chose to accept but not endorse the final document. Eventually the standards were disseminated to school districts as optional guidelines, not mandated standards.

The Moral of the Story

Michigan's experience provides a valuable lesson with respect to a common problem. If legislators or other public officials want new ideas implemented, they cannot simply turn the task over to the parties who have been presiding over the status quo. They need consultation from professionals who are independent of the implementing bureaucracy and unequivocally committed to the new aims.

As is true in fields such as engineering, the implementation of large technical projects typically require independent expert oversight. Such second opinions may be an added cost but they are certainly less expensive than the kind of waste that resulted from the MELAF project.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com