

THE POLICY CLOCK

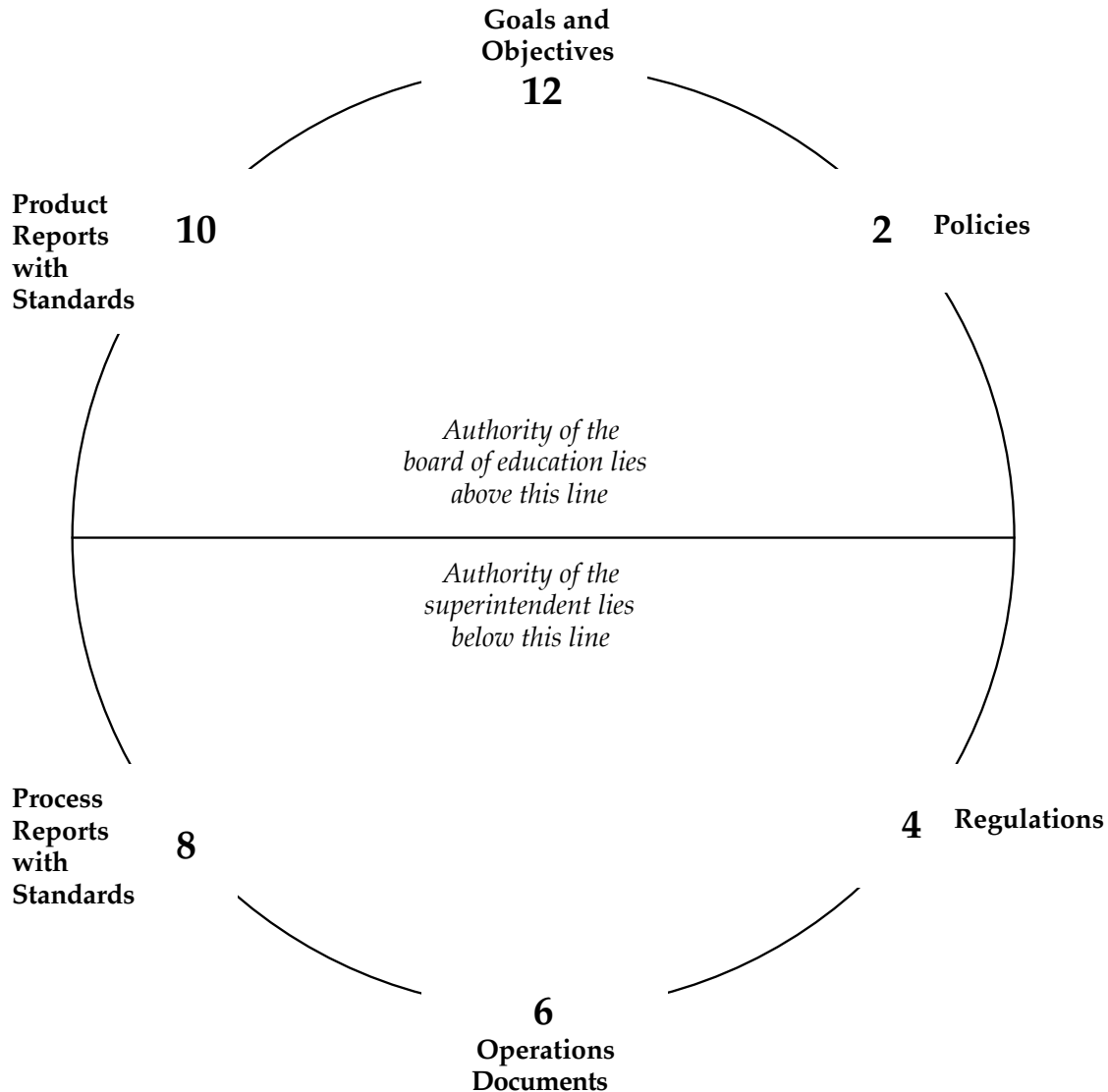
A TIME TO GOVERN . . .

A TIME TO MANAGE

HENRY M. BRICKELL AND REGINA H. PAUL
POLICY STUDIES IN EDUCATION
WWW.POLICYSTUDIES.ORG

Overview of the Policy Clock

The six key decision points in the operations of a school district can be laid out around the face of a clock, making them both simple to understand and easy to communicate. There are documents at each of the six points:



Clockwise, the goals and objectives guide the choice of policies that will shape the schooling required to produce the learning called for by the goals and objectives. Those policies frame the regulations that will further shape the schooling. That schooling will be described first in operations documents and then in process reports. The results of that schooling will be described later in product reports, with those results compared to the goals and objectives, thus closing the circle.

Counterclockwise, unsatisfactory product reports require a look first at process reports and then at operations documents to find flaws that require corrections in the schooling

by modifying regulations and/or policies to increase the likelihood of accomplishing the goals and objectives.

12 o'clock—*Goals and Objectives*

These are descriptions of what students must learn in school—what they must know, feel, and do. Curriculum goals and objectives are the *ends* of schooling. They are prepared and proposed by the superintendent and the professional staff and then judged and adopted by the board. Until they are set, the clock cannot start ticking.

2 o'clock—*Policies*

These are *general means* statements, prepared and proposed by the superintendent and other school personnel and then judged and adopted by the board to guide the superintendent and other school personnel in achieving the curriculum goals and objectives that the board adopted at 12 o'clock. Policies are *guides for discretionary action*. They must truly guide the superintendent and other school personnel in what to do; and, yet, they must allow discretion in making fine-grained decisions about the detailed means for achieving the 12 o'clock goals and objectives.

4 o'clock—*Regulations*

These are *detailed means* statements for achieving the 12 o'clock curriculum goals and objectives. Regulations are *specifications of required action*, directing school personnel as to what they must do. They are prepared and adopted by the superintendent (usually upon the recommendation of other school personnel) to carry out the policies adopted by the board. Regulations are not adopted by the board.

6 o'clock—*Operations Documents*

These are the detailed plans, procedures, schedules, announcements, and memoranda used daily to operate the schools, pursuant to the policies and regulations. They are designed and written by the superintendent, other central office administrators, building administrators, professional committees, and individual teachers as they exercise their authority. Operations documents control a thousand details in the operations of instruction, buildings and grounds, finance, personnel, student activities, and community relations.

8 o'clock—*Process Reports with Standards*

These are reports designed by the superintendent and other school personnel that tell whether the policies and regulations are being followed and whether the operations are being carried out to standards set by the superintendent. They tell whether the planned processes are in place. Prepared by the superintendent and other administrators to monitor their own activities, process reports can provide distant early warnings of possible failure to reach the 12 o'clock curriculum goals and objectives—warnings that come early enough to trigger corrective action.

10 o'clock—*Product Reports with Standards*

These are reports that tell the superintendent and the board the degree to which the 12 o'clock curriculum goals and objectives have been achieved. Thus, they are reports of student learning—knowledge, attitudes, and skills—compared to standards recommended by the superintendent and adopted by the board to judge student learning. Product reports tell the board whether the order it placed at 12 o'clock was filled by the superintendent, staff, and students.

12 O’Clock—Goals and Objectives

There are no goals and objectives for school districts except what students learn—the *ends* of schooling. Everything else, without exception, is a *means* to those ends.

Thus, it is not a goal to sell a bond issue, not an objective to purchase and install new computers, not a goal to hold professional development workshops, not an objective to fill all teacher vacancies by July. Those are all, without exception, means for achieving the real goals and objectives.

Curriculum goals and objectives are the real ones. They are the *what* of learning, not the *how* of teaching. The how of teaching may be described later at 2 o’clock and 4 o’clock and even 6 o’clock. But the curriculum goals and objectives go first—at 12 o’clock. They start the clock ticking.

If the descriptions of student learning—that is, the curriculum goals and objectives—are to guide the daily choice of means at 2 and 4 and 6, those descriptions must be clear and vivid. Further, they must be shared and understood by all of those responsible for student learning: teachers, administrators, parents, and students themselves.

A Pyramid of Possibilities

Curriculum goals and objectives for student learning can be stated at different levels of specificity. There are merits and demerits in using each level. For example, the less specific the statements, the fewer it takes to describe an educated student—an attractive economy in words. On the other hand, the more specific the statements, the more likely they can be accurately judged or even measured—an attractive form of proof.

The term *goal* is customarily used in the profession to mean a description more general than the term *objective*, indeed to mean something that summarizes a set of objectives and that results from achieving a set of objectives. Even so, curriculum goals themselves can be written at various levels of specificity and so can curriculum objectives.

Imagine an infinite intellectual pyramid of possible curriculum goals and objectives, ranging from “reaches her potential” at the apex to “names the capitals of the 50 states” at the base. Moving up the pyramid, one finds increasingly broad statements with wider and wider “coverage.” Moving down the pyramid, one finds increasingly detailed statements that are more interpretable and easier to evaluate. Educators over the years have created or assembled countless collections of curriculum goals and objectives describing desirable student learning in various grades and various subjects at every imaginable level of specificity.

A school district must choose the level or levels at which it wants to describe student learning. For classroom teachers, statements have to be quite specific for planning lessons and units, selecting materials, and evaluating learning. The same is true for principals making classroom visits and for evaluators designing tests. All of them need quite specific curriculum objectives. For the superintendent, on the other hand, curriculum statements may need to be broader for communicating to the public what is most and

least important for students to learn. The same is true for other central administrators who are concerned with broader issues, such as whether reading is more important than writing, whether mathematics is more important than science, whether all students are to learn the performing arts or only students with special talent. All of them can use somewhat broader curriculum goals.

Priorities can be set at the top of the pyramid with broad goals, but teaching and evaluation must take place at the bottom with specific objectives.

Most school districts find that two levels are sufficient for describing desired student learning: one level for curriculum goals and one level for curriculum objectives. Defining more than two levels is a difficult intellectual exercise, and maintaining a system with more than two levels is even more difficult. More important, two levels are enough to satisfy all users for all uses: enough to guide the operations, enough to evaluate the results.

Here are some good examples of the two levels:

Sample Curriculum Goals

- Writes in a clear and organized fashion
- Estimates answers to mathematical problems with reasonable accuracy
- Analyzes current U.S. social, political, and economic problems
- Believes in conserving natural resources
- Speaks a second language
- Uses computer software to create and manipulate databases and spreadsheets
- Displays good sportsmanship when playing with others
- Chooses a place for the arts in his or her life

Sample Curriculum Objectives

- Develops multi-paragraph compositions using stated comparisons and contrasts
- Finds the perimeter of a square, given the length of only one side
- Summarizes the story of the Boston Tea Party of 1773
- Builds series and parallel circuits
- Uses the definite articles *la* and *le*
- Uses the basic formatting commands in a word processing program
- Uses warm-up and cool-down activities routinely when exercising
- Sings two-part rounds

Curriculum goals and objectives should be challenging, comprehensive, clearly written, and free of educational jargon. They should be understandable to all of the stakeholders in a school district, including parents and, of course, the board.

Once proposed by the superintendent and adopted by the board, the curriculum goals and objectives become the teaching and learning targets of all school personnel as well as of parents and of students themselves.

Remember that curriculum goals and objectives are the ends of schooling; everything else is just the means.

2 O’Clock—Policies

A policy is a *guide for discretionary action* adopted by the board of education to guide the operations of the school district. A policy is narrow enough to give clear guidance as to what kinds of action the board considers appropriate, yet broad enough to leave room for discretion in deciding exactly what actions to take.

Policy making should be a way of life for a board. It should be continuous—not the subject of a special project each decade or even of an annual review. The board should not turn away from its regular work to make policy. Making policy should be the board’s regular work. Discussing, debating, and adopting policies should occur at each board meeting. That is what it means to govern the school operations.

From the board’s perspective, policies give it maximum control—more control than it can get by making regulations (that is, *specifications of required action*), more than it can get by making case-by-case decisions, and more than it can get by reviewing the superintendent’s detailed decisions. This is because a policy has breadth. It covers many different circumstances and countless cases. It even reaches out ahead and controls circumstances and cases not yet considered when the board adopted it.

Moreover, a policy is always there, even when the board is not. Seven days a week, 12 months a year, it speaks for the board.

Rather than deciding a specific case, the board should debate and adopt a policy covering cases like that one. A policy discussion lifts the topic above the emotion surrounding the case and lets the board take a less pressured action. Once the board makes the policy, the superintendent can decide the case.

From the superintendent’s perspective, policies give him or her maximum freedom to administer school operations—more than following a precedent, more than checking with the board president, more than waiting for a board meeting to ask. This is because a policy speaks for the entire board—or at least for the majority. It speaks from a time when the board was deliberating not a single case, but a general line of action, based on one or more principles. That is what makes it stable and predictive of the board’s future preferences.

There is more:

1. Policies summarize the accumulated wisdom of previous boards as well as previous superintendents—and they do it in the best possible form for easy use by the current board and superintendent.
2. Policies save an enormous amount of time for the board because they make whole classes of decisions in a single stroke, instruct the superintendent on how to decide cases without elaborate discussion in board meetings, and delegate a thousand decisions that never need to come to the board.
3. Policies are the best possible “workshop in print” for newly elected board members, drawing a clear boundary between the authority of the board

and the authority of the superintendent—a boundary that may be awkward for the superintendent to draw.

Policies are the way for the board to guide and simultaneously to free the superintendent in every aspect of school operations:

- Community relations
- Administration
- Business and noninstructional operations
- Personnel
- Students
- Instruction

The board's policy manual should have a table of contents that breaks down each of these six broad areas so that the hundreds of topics that must be addressed in running school operations can be classified into one of the six categories and, as it becomes necessary, made the subject of a policy.

A policy can be expressed in a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a page, or a policy paper. Here are some examples of very short policies from outside the domain of education:

- Safety first
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- All the news that's fit to print
- Look before you leap.
- Speak softly and carry a big stick.

All of them give firm guidance; none of them dictates specific action. Those are the twin tests of a good policy statement. Many, many boards adopt "policies" that fail one of these tests. Most frequently, policies fail on the first test—that is, they are so general that they give no guidance at all. They are little more than philosophy and platitudes. Such policies are really not worth having. They will not help the superintendent make good decisions, and they will not help the board wield its authority wisely.

Here are some brief policy statements on education matters:

- All elementary school classrooms shall be racially balanced.
- The RTA shall be used to transport secondary school students to and from school when the total travel time, including walking, is reasonable.
- Periodic evaluations by the community of both the attractiveness and the effectiveness of the print media published by the school district shall be made and reported to the board of education.
- First priority in the use of school time in the elementary grades shall be given to teaching mathematics. A substantial amount of instructional time each day shall be scheduled for teaching mathematics to elementary school students.
- Repeated attempts shall be made to contact parents about their child's absences whenever they are not reached by the initial attempt.

Once made, a policy can be executed or administered by the superintendent in one of two ways: (1) by making a single decision about a single case in keeping with the policy; or (2) by adopting regulations in keeping with the policy—that is, regulations that will control many single decisions made by others in the future. Both methods are necessary, but making regulations is an especially efficient way for the superintendent to exercise his or her discretion by making one decision that controls many others. We turn the clock hands to 4 o'clock to see how regulations work.

4 O’Clock—Regulations

A regulation is a *specification of required action* adopted by the superintendent or other administrators to guide the operations of the school district. A regulation tells exactly what must be done, often tells by whom it must be done, and sometimes tells when and how and where they must do it. It deliberately leaves little or no room for judgment.

Making regulations is one major method used by administrators to carry out the board’s intentions as expressed in board policies. Administrators make regulations when they want to leave little or no room for deviation—when they want to be positive that certain things will be done by certain people at certain times in certain ways.

Boards should not make regulations for two reasons, both extremely important:

1. Board members cannot know enough about the daily details of school operations to debate or decide upon good regulations.
2. Exceptions to regulations need to be made in special situations—sometimes immediately—and the board cannot be there to make those exceptions. Any exceptions to regulations must, of course, be made inside the boundary of board policy.

Nevertheless, the board can exert strong influence on regulations by the way it shapes its policies. This is because administrative regulations must conform to those policies.

There are a few topics on which the superintendent and other administrators do not actually want the power to make exceptions. They want to say to teachers or parents or students or taxpayers: “The Board of Education requires this. There is nothing I can do.” On such topics, the board itself can adopt a regulation proposed by the superintendent, effectively tying administrative hands by pre-deciding against every specific request for an administrative exception.

Because only those who make the rules can break the rules, whoever makes a regulation must expect requests for exceptions. Whenever the board adopts a regulation, it automatically draws those requests onto its own agenda. Since dealing with such requests is seldom a good use of the board’s time, the board should adopt regulations only on those few topics on which the superintendent and other administrators do not want the traffic or cannot handle the pressure of making exceptions. Those topics might include these, for example:

- Age of entrance to kindergarten
- Travel expense allowances for board members
- Requirements for making up school days lost because of weather
- The formula used for selecting the graduating class’s valedictorian

Regulations are useful as evidence in litigation—more useful than policies because regulations are specific. The courts expect government agencies—including the public schools—to be systematic, to publish clear rules, to give fair notice, and to act without bias. Regulations constitute written proof (assuming that they are administered as

written) that the school government meets the Constitutional tests applied by the courts in deciding cases.

Many regulations are negotiated into union contracts. Indeed, those contracts tend to be collections of personnel regulations agreed to by the board and the union, deliberately taking the power to make exceptions out of the hands of administrators. The strongest single argument advanced by unions in favor of labor contracts has been the need to prevent arbitrary, unfair, and biased actions by administrators. Even today, a common cause for grievances is alleged attempts by administrators to make exceptions to what the contract requires. Once a regulation is embedded in a contract, only the board and the union, acting jointly, can make changes or make exceptions.

A regulation, like a policy, can be expressed in a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a page, or a handbook. Here are some examples of very short regulations from outside the domain of education:

- No smoking
- Stop on red.
- This side up
- One to a customer
- Close cover before striking.
- Three strikes and you're out.

All of them dictate specific actions; none of them leaves room for judgment or permits deviation. Yet, all of them are subject to wise exceptions in special circumstances: We do not stop on red when the traffic officer waves us on through; we do turn the container on its side rather than tearing down the doorway to make the delivery; and the store owner may give two to her best customer if asked.

Here are some brief regulations on education matters, although regulations can, of course, contain far more detail than these:

- PTAs will not be charged for the use of school facilities, regardless of the time, length, or type of use.
- Police will be given the name, age, grade, address, and telephone number of any student bringing a firearm onto school property within four hours of the occurrence.
- Vendors' bills must be received in the district's business office no later than 4:30 p.m. on the fifth business day preceding the board meeting at which payment will be requested.
- Each teacher retiring after 10 or more years of service to the district will be presented with a framed letter of appreciation signed by the President of the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools.

In some school districts, in the name of decentralization, the board may adopt a policy intended to delegate authority directly to individual schools, purposely eliminating districtwide administrative regulations, as might be the case with a board policy like this:

Elementary schools shall be strongly encouraged to celebrate the diversity of students in their own individual buildings by favorable recognition of such differences as the students' native languages,

holidays, games, foods, and dress. Schools shall be permitted great flexibility and creativity in how they conduct such celebrations.

A Note about Bylaws: Bylaws are regulations adopted by the board to control its relations with itself. They regulate matters like meeting schedules, size of a quorum, titles of board officers, duties of officers, and related matters of board procedures. Bylaws may be filed in the back of the board's policy manual, but they are regulations, not policies.

6 O’Clock—Operations Documents

Most documents created or used by a school district do not contain goals or objectives, policies, regulations, process reports, or product reports. They are instead the countless other documents used to do the daily business of the schools.

Because they are not tools to govern or to evaluate the operations, they are of little use to the board and thus should be of little interest to the board. But they are essential to the superintendent and other administrators.

Guided both by the framework of board policies set at 2 o’clock and administrative regulations set at 4 o’clock as well as by the set of required process reports at 8 o’clock and required product reports at 10 o’clock for which they must collect information, these documents make orderly school operations possible.

While no list can do justice to the full range of operations documents, the list below suggests their diversity:

- Records of principals’ classroom observations
- Student handbooks
- Bus schedules
- Administrative bulletins
- Lunch menus
- Solicitations of price quotations for goods wanted
- Bills from vendors
- Maintenance manuals
- Lists of advisory committee members
- Parental permission slips
- Blueprints
- Curriculum committee reports
- Emergency drill procedures
- Newsletters to parents
- Purchase orders
- Personnel records
- Lists of substitute teachers
- Employment applications
- Memoranda setting up interscholastic sports schedules
- Correspondence with state officials

Many school district “documents” are both created and filed in electronic form and are displayed on paper when needed. This discussion makes no distinction between the two since the format does not affect the authority or the responsibility of either the board or the superintendent regarding their content.

Some operations documents quote or paraphrase items from documents located at other points on the clock. A handbook for teachers or an application blank for prospective employees or an instruction sheet for vendors may quote from a policy or a regulation. Such 6 o’clock operations documents do not *establish* those policies or regulations; they merely cite them in convenient form.

District curriculum guides—widely used operations documents—usually draw from other points on the clock. The typical curriculum guide contains 12 o’clock curriculum objectives and sometimes curriculum goals. It may contain selected 4 o’clock regulations and occasionally 2 o’clock policies. It may contain forms to collect information for 8 o’clock process reports. It often contains test questions or other assessment techniques that provide some of the data for 10 o’clock product reports. Again, the curriculum guide does not *establish* any of these, but simply assembles them in a single location convenient for teachers. The bulk of the curriculum guide, of course, consists of suggested and sometimes required teaching activities and teaching materials.

One approach that some school districts use to decentralize authority from the central office to the individual schools or to clusters of schools is to establish regulations only on matters requiring districtwide uniformity. That leaves the individual schools or clusters free to conduct operations on other matters as they elect, including designing their own operations documents—as long as they stay within the boundaries of board policy.

Leaving the writing of operations documents to the administrators and other school personnel shows respect for their abilities. More importantly, the pre-service training that many of them received in colleges of education and their daily experiences in the trenches equip them well for that kind of work. That is why most operations documents used by schools turn out to be entirely adequate.

On the other hand, what usually needs work are the documents at other points on the clock, points at which the board and the superintendent can exert greater influence and can have greater impact with less effort than at 6 o’clock.

Because the board can gain sufficient control and oversight of school district operations with 12 o’clock goals and objectives, 2 o’clock policies, and 10 o’clock product reports of student learning, it can and should leave the 6 o’clock operations documents to the administrators and other school personnel.

8 O’Clock—Process Reports with Standards

Process reports are gauges as to whether—and how well—the 2 o’clock policies and the 4 o’clock regulations are being carried out. They tell nothing about the *ends* of schooling—student learning—but tell only whether the *means* of schooling actually being used match the means of schooling envisioned and indeed required by the policies and regulations. An unsatisfactory match is a distant early warning that the *actual means* might not produce the *intended ends*—that is, that the schooling being used might not achieve the student learning called for at 12 o’clock.

We might well call process reports “administrative reports” (*to* the administrators rather than from them) because the superintendent and other administrators need to know whether things are running as they should—and they need to know soon enough to correct bad operations before they cause harm. There are many possibilities for prospective harm, including damage to public relations, damage to school finances, damage to legal liability, damage to teacher morale, or, most important, damage to student learning.

Process reports are designed to describe ongoing operations in such a way that they reveal success or failure, whichever is the case. To do that, they must contain more than raw data, whether verbal or statistical. Data are meaningless in and of themselves. Data cannot reveal either success or failure unless the descriptions they provide are compared to some kind of standards for how those descriptions should look. That is, the facts must be judged or else they are not worth the money it takes to collect and report them—except perhaps to satisfy outside legal requirements. All judgments require standards.

A process standard is a template for examining whether or how an activity *is being conducted*, not for examining the *results* of that activity. It is a standard for judging how a game is being played, not for judging the final score; a standard for judging the way an automobile is being driven, not for judging whether it reaches its destination; a standard for judging a teacher’s processes—enthusiasm, creativity, warmth, orderliness, clear explanations, fair testing, unbiased grading—not for judging the student learning that results.

There are two kinds of process standards, each having its advantages and disadvantages:

- ***Absolute standards***—They describe desired district processes, irrespective of what other districts are doing.

Here is one standard of that type: There will be no incidents of vandalism.

- ***Comparative standards***—They describe desired district processes expressed as comparisons to what other districts are doing.

Here is one standard of that type: Cost per student mile for bus transportation will be at or below the average cost in similar districts.

Once either absolute or comparative standards have been set and data have been displayed against those standards, an analysis can be made about the success or failure of the

activity. Of course, those successes and failures should be looked at over time in order to learn whether things are getting better, getting worse, or staying the same in the district.

A process report can describe any activity in the school district. Here are examples of common and uncommon topics covered by such reports:

- Revenues and expenses
- PTA meeting attendance as a percent of PTA membership
- Substitute teacher turnover rates
- Proportion of high school students electing advanced academic courses
- Frequency of parents' visits to schools
- Progress of construction projects
- Number and types of personnel grievances
- Student attendance rates
- Library book circulation as a fraction of holdings
- Competitive grants received from outside sources
- Student mobility into and out of the school district
- Number and types of student disciplinary infractions
- Proportion of contracts awarded to minority vendors
- Incidence of communicable diseases among elementary school children
- Emergency equipment maintenance service calls
- Proportion of teachers completing graduate degrees
- Actions taken on recommendations of vocational advisory committees
- Attendance at professional development workshops held for teachers

Even this brief list demonstrates that many kinds of process reports are imaginable—more than any school budget could afford. Here are some criteria for setting priorities among all those imaginable and for deciding which reports are worth producing:

1. This process affects student learning.
2. This process affects the safety and security of students and staff.
3. This process affects the budget.
4. This process affects legal liabilities.
5. This process affects the public's image of the district.

Unfortunately, almost all reports appearing on board agendas are process reports (also unfortunately, unaccompanied by standards for judgment). As we said earlier, these are “administrative reports.” They effectively invite the board out of governance and into administration—that is, out from macro-guidance and into micro-management. Rather than spending its time examining product reports of student learning, comparing them to its established goals and objectives, and adjusting its policies to increase learning, the board is led to lean over the superintendent's shoulder and offer management advice and even directives about school processes.

Board members lack the expertise for this. Moreover, it is a weak way for the board to use its power. Every moment studying process reports is a moment lost from studying product reports. The board should leave process reports to the superintendent and the other administrators and insist instead on being brought product reports that can be judged against the board's standards for student learning, as explained at 10 o'clock.

10 O’Clock—Product Reports with Standards

The product of schooling is an educated person. Thus, a product report is a report of learning accomplished by the students—what kindergartners have learned about the alphabet, second graders about dribbling, fourth graders about igneous rock, seventh graders about musical notation, ninth graders about quadratic equations, eleventh graders about James Madison, twelfth graders about speaking French, or whatever the superintendent recommended and the board decided students should learn when it set its 12 o’clock curriculum goals and objectives.

The blueprint for the product reports is those curriculum goals and objectives. Every objective can be the basis for a test question—whether that “test question” is an essay, an experiment, a trombone solo, an analysis of original historical sources, a speech, a soccer match, a multiple-choice question, or some other way for students to demonstrate what they have learned. The answers to such questions become the 10 o’clock product reports placed on the board’s table. The answers to the “test questions” about a cluster of related objectives become the evidence as to whether the *goal* represented by the *cluster of objectives* has been achieved. For example, evidence that the goal “writes persuasively” has been accomplished by eleventh graders is assembled from evidence that they have learned the various aspects of persuasive writing described by the cluster of objectives specifying a variety of persuasive writing skills.

Unless the board—and, of course, the superintendent, who will create and present the product reports to the board—has product reports matching its 12 o’clock curriculum goals and objectives, it cannot know any of these:

- To what degree it has succeeded or failed as a board
- Whether and how it must adjust its 2 o’clock policies to produce the student learning it seeks
- Whether the superintendent and the professional staff are performing as intended
- Whether the taxpayers are being well served

As to the timing of product reports, the board can have them as often as it wants. It need not wait until year’s end. It can have them as often as the end of each marking period, or quarterly, or by semester, as it chooses. It can have the superintendent establish a rotating schedule of reports grade by grade and subject by subject—for example, high school mathematics and music at the end of the first quarter, middle school art and social studies at the end of the second, elementary school language arts and physical education at the end of the third, and so on throughout the school and calendar year.

Of course, having frequent product reports can get expensive. Just as with process reports, a board might dream of having more than any school budget could afford. Here are some criteria for a responsible board to use in setting priorities among possible product reports:

1. This report provides evidence about student learning in the most important school subjects.

2. This report provides evidence about student learning at key transition grades—from elementary to middle school, from middle to high school, and from high school to college.
3. This report provides evidence about student learning in the grades and subjects in which the district has performed worst in recent years.

The superintendent and the professional staff will, of course, have to design and administer a testing program to generate the reports the board wants. That program could include commercially available nationally standardized tests, state tests (where available and/or required), and locally made tests matched perfectly to the board's 12 o'clock curriculum goals and objectives. The guidance for such a testing program would come to the superintendent from the board itself when it adopts its 2 o'clock policy on testing.

Just as with process reports, the information in product reports—whether expressed in words, numbers, or graphics; whether recorded on paper or by a computer—is meaningless unless accompanied by standards for judgment. Any individual may have a standard for judging student learning—any teacher, parent, administrator, or board member. That is not enough. The board as the legally constituted governing body must have standards for judging student learning—that is, collective standards agreed to by a majority.

And exactly as with process reports, each type of standard has pros and cons:

- ***Absolute standards***—They describe desired district results, regardless of what other districts are producing.

Here is one standard of that type: 80 percent of the fifth graders will pass the district's own science test with a score of 70 percent correct or better.

- ***Comparative standards***—They describe desired district results expressed as comparisons to what other districts are producing.

Here is one standard of that type: Average district test scores in reading in each of the elementary grades will be at or above the 85th national percentile.

And exactly as with process reports, once either absolute or comparative standards have been set and data have been displayed against those standards, an analysis can be made about whether the district achieved the desired results. Further, those achievements should be looked at over time in order to determine whether learning is improving in the district. In fact, the board may want to set progressively higher standards for the next three to five years as a way of calling for continuous improvement.

The most powerful way for a board to exert its authority over the schools is not to hire a new superintendent, not to perform well at televised board meetings, not to sell a bond issue and preside over the construction of a new school—important as those are. The most powerful way is for the board to keep its eyes trained on product reports, to judge the evidence of student learning against its standards, and to discuss those judgments with the superintendent—especially when the results are not satisfactory. Producing learning is, to repeat, the only reason for the schools to exist, the only reason for the board to exist.