On Standards and Public Policy:
A Conversation with Arthur Wise
Arthur Wise, Senior Social Scientist at the Rand Corporation, Washington, D.C., criticized the tendency of courts and legislatures to bureaucratize schools in his 1979 book, *Legislated Learning*. In this interview Wise, a consultant to the ASCD task force that investigated the Florida legislature's new graduation requirements, argues that public officials are still using the wrong approach in their efforts to improve education.

**RON BRANDT**

The Commission on Excellence recommends higher graduation requirements, more stringent standards, more homework. What will be the results if those recommendations are followed? Well, to some degree American education has become soft, so we must have higher standards—in intelligently applied. We have gone far in allowing students to choose electives and we have not expected as much in the way of work and hard work as we should. But when state policymakers get into the act, there is a tendency for them to try to translate their goals and aspirations into something more concrete by passing legislation.

For example, in the middle and late 1970s, many of the states adopted minimum competency testing. As some of us predicted, that led to an overemphasis on basic skills and preparation for tests. The failure of minimum competency testing to improve education should have taught legislators something, but it probably did not.

You've been opposed to minimum competency testing from the beginning. It's too simplistic. Its only effect could have been to cause the state to become more active in determining educational policy and practice than it should be. You may recall that many of the states said they would start with tests in basic reading and arithmetic but that they planned eventually to cover the entire high school curriculum. In other words, there would be a statewide test for graduation that would in effect determine the high school curriculum. Fortunately, we haven't seen that happen, and while minimum competency testing remains on the books, people are paying less and less attention to it, in part because policymakers have recognized the limitations of that approach as we face the obviously growing demand for a more highly educated citizenry.

Is there a difference between minimum competency testing mandated for a whole state and tests used at the local level to check whether students are learning what they should? Tests are a necessary part of good school management. What bothered me about the minimum competency testing movement is that if it were taken seriously, it would have led to the creation of a state-level bureaucracy that would not only have planned the tests, but would slowly have gotten into the management and design of the curriculum.

And even though testing is necessary, I think standardized testing is overemphasized in this country. Instead of teaching children reading and history in a way that will help them gain appreciation for those subjects, we teach them so as to ensure that they will do well on the tests.

**How did we get to be so dependent on testing?**

It arises partly because we no longer trust teachers to tell how well students have learned. It used to be that teachers' grades were accepted as an accurate statement of students' learning. Schools continue to have report cards, of course, but they've also been developing external mechanisms to check on teachers, and teachers recognize that.

Tests are part of a wide-ranging set of forces that are undermining the teacher's role and making teaching less attractive, which in turn causes fewer talented people to choose teaching as a career. And that brings us full circle. Having intervened repeatedly in the last decade or two to try to improve the quality of education, policymakers may have made things worse, which in fact will result in even poorer teachers than we have now. That is the real crisis in education.

You're saying that policymakers have actually contributed to the crisis. I believe that at the root of people's lack of confidence in education is their perception of the quality of people staffing our schools. And the regulatory efforts of the last decade and a half that I explored in *Legislated Learning* were attempts to control what was being done in classrooms, even though in fact very little could be done. For the last decade we have had pretty much a static teaching force. American education couldn't be reformed by changing either the nature of the people going into teaching or their preparation experiences. The steps that were taken—regulation, legislation—made the role of the classroom teacher more bureaucratic. And according to research I am conducting with Linda Darling-Hammond, my colleague here at the Rand Corporation, teachers are unhappy about it, especially the best qualified ones. Those with more degrees and those with degrees in the academic disciplines are the most likely to chafe under these restrictions.

So some of them may quit teaching and it will be hard to find people of their caliber to take their place?

Complicating the situation is that in three or four years there will probably be a shortage of teachers, for demographic reasons. And of course research shows that over the last decade or so the average measured ability of people entering teaching has been declining. So not only will we probably have an abso-

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A shortage of teachers, but we almost certainly will have a shortage of people whom the public would regard as highly qualified. Now, having high measured academic ability does not ensure that a person will be a good teacher, but in the public's mind, especially now, there is a close association. So if they know that academically inferior people are becoming teachers, they will not have confidence in the schools.

Conversely, if the public has evidence that academically talented people \textit{are} becoming teachers, they will begin to develop confidence in the schools and may be willing to leave teachers relatively alone to practice their profession. That, it seems to me, is the key to solving many of the problems that beset American education.

Are there some ways that legislators and other policymakers can do a better job of foreseeing the results of their actions? Well, there is an approach we use at the Rand Corporation called "policy analysis." Typically, you either look back at policies enacted by governments and try to trace their effects, or you try to predict the consequences of policies being considered. These two classes of activities—retrospective and prospective policy analysis—are rather closely related. To analyze possible effects of policies currently under consideration, you try to apply lessons learned from the application of other policies in the past.

Policymakers haven't displayed a lot of interest in policy analysis in recent years, indeed, there is almost a disdain for it. The Commission on Excellence, for example, did not betray any great understanding of the findings of educational research or of policy analysis. Their report seems to have been written by thoughtful people, but they did not take a lot of time to try to understand the full implications of what they were saying.

What's an example of successful use of policy analysis in the public sector? Policy analysis is only one ingredient in policy making. Policymakers are driven more by a desire to gain credit for having done something about a problem as by any other motivation. I'm not suggesting they are deceitful or cynical, but that political careers—even bureaucratic careers—are made by proposing new things. You get credit for raising people's hopes about your ability to solve a problem shortly down the road. Nobody in the political arena gets credit for saving he or she is going to solve a problem 10 or 15 years from now. It has to be within the next three years. When you're trying to have rapid impact, you may have a beneficial effect, but you may not. And I'd have to say that much of what has been tried over the last 15 years has missed.

If legislation trying to force higher standards won't work, what is a more appropriate strategy for policymakers? Most of the policies tried in recent years, particularly at the state level, have cost very little or nothing. They were regulatory initiatives. The result was what could have been expected: pay little, get little. I'm afraid that what is needed is going to cost money. Teacher salaries, for example, have been declining in recent years in real terms. We have a long way to go to make beginning and average salaries of teachers somewhat competitive with the alternatives available to able people.

Besides that, I think that frankly we're going to have to lure people into teaching. College education these days is very expensive, so you could get young people to think about teaching by offering financial assistance—scholarships, fellowships, loans—or for teaching generally or for teaching in specified fields.

Paradoxically, some things that need to occur may not be all that expensive. In some cases we have evolved rather elaborate bureaucracies in our school systems that are costly and tend to deprofessionalize the work of classroom teachers. If you have central administrators doing all the planning and decision making, you downgrade the role of the classroom teacher. One of the ways to make teaching more attractive is to delegate some of the responsibilities that have gravitated upward in the bureaucracy. That is, I think that teachers—while remaining classroom teachers—must be freed part of the time to do the important work of inducting new teachers into the school system, of helping evaluate their peers, of planning the curriculum, of providing inservice workshops, and so on.

A final comment on higher standards? The road from standards to standardized testing to standardized teaching to standardized students is a short one. We must keep from going all the way down that road. We have to find a way to establish high standards and expectations, and communicate them to the people who need to know and use them, without the rigidities I've seen associated with much educational policymaking.\footnote{Arthur E. Wise, \textit{Legislated Learning: The Bureaucratization of the American Classroom} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).}