

Excellence in the Public Schools

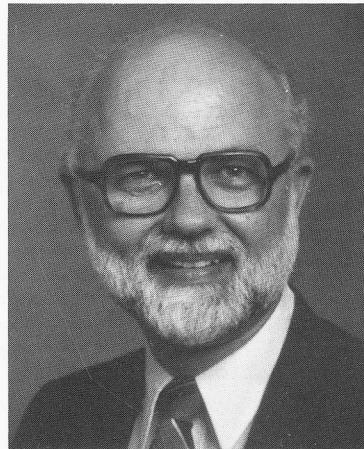
William L. Wharton

Dimensions of Education Reform

The legislative activity affecting public schools during the years of 1982 through 1986 comprised a complex array of provisions calling for a wide range of major and minor changes in local and state policies and practices, along with appropriations for those priorities requiring fiscal support. While some new initiatives were identified, much of what passed into law represented an effort to maintain past initiatives, and to "fine-tune" the legal base in order to respond to situations which were not anticipated, which may have changed since previous policy was enacted, and which appear likely to change as the result of projected trends. In both legislative and executive processes, the most practical kind of vision is one with a shifting focus, looking both forward and back, attending to details and also seeing broad patterns. The most practical style of action must also shift, sometimes making decisions and taking actions that move in new directions, but also fine-tuning the actions and decisions of the past.

To get a good picture of policy development and implementation in Florida education requires the same shifting-focus vision, with attention to the results of both kinds of action. Such a picture reveals certain patterns which constitute a continuing framework of major issues and thrusts in a dynamic context, a context of past-to-future movement forward, along both an "issue" and a "thrust" dimension simultaneously.

The "issue" dimension has to do with three sets of ongoing issues of nationwide scope. The first issue set is concerned with STRUCTURE in education, that is of quality, effectiveness, curriculum — the rules and standards, tools and techniques, roles and prescriptions to be set up as optimum conditions for teaching and learning. Another set of issues is concerned with EQUITY in education, issues of access and opportunity — the rules and standards, safeguards and actions required to assure a balance of justice and compassion in setting priorities and allocating resources. A third set of issues relates to CONTROL in education, issues of power, accountability, and decision-making — setting agendas, determining responsibilities, negotiating priorities and maintaining democratic processes. There is always overlap among these issues, and many sources of pressure to change and to resist change. For example, advocates for structural changes to promote "higher quality" or "excellence" may press for raising standards, which may trigger counter pressures from those who



Dr. Wharton was the first research director for the Florida Institute of Education. He now observes developments in education as a private consultant.

fear that overemphasis on such policies will jeopardize equal opportunity, and those who are vigilant about possible infringements upon the autonomy of local school boards. All three of these issues — "promoting excellence," "assuring equality of opportunity" and "maintaining local control" — are represented in public policy goals; the need to address concerns and maintain progress in all three issue areas has presented a special challenge to those who formulate and those who implement policies for education reform.

In Florida, the "thrust" dimension includes four major areas of movement toward educational improvement, each of which has received a special measure of attention at the state policy level over the past several years. These four thrusts are (1) IMPROVING INSTRUCTION IN PRIORITY AREAS, (2) QUALITY STAFF, (3) ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH ASSESSMENT, ANALYSIS, EVALUATION AND GOAL-SETTING AND (4) IMPROVEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT.

Each of these thrusts comprises a range of initiatives, has commanded substantial resource allocation, addresses several of the issue areas identified above, and represents a full-scale effort toward producing constructive change in Florida's public schools.

Four Major Thrusts

The first thrust, for IMPROVING INSTRUCTION IN PRIORITY AREAS, includes a wide range of initiatives which are providing targeted support to specific