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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a look into the future of educational program auditing and presents a detailed discussion of the notion of a districtwide educational audit. To date, virtually all program audit activities have occurred as a result of specially funded State or federal education programs. Once the program ends, or changes its requirements, the audit is eliminated. The author argues that the only way in which educational program auditing can have a long-range impact on improved decisionmaking and accountability is to have the audit conducted at the school district level as a regular and continuing activity. (Author/DN)

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AUDITING: PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE*

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Educational program audits, as we have known them, exhibit three common characteristics. First, they have, almost without exception, been Federally mandated. Second, because of their association with a specifically funded project, they are shortlived. Finally, their final reports must be directed towards meeting legal requirements.

Educational audits were originally established as a part of ESEA Title VII (Bilingual Education) and Title VIII (Dropout Prevention). The regulations governing the programs stated that schools or districts benefiting from the Federal funds "...must provide for an independent educational accomplishment audit of the project to apprise school officials of the validity of their own evaluative processes and data (Title VII Manual p.11)." In many of the districts, the typical pattern was for the evaluation to be conducted internally, either with the project director performing the evaluation functions himself or, in the case of larger projects, with other district staff conducting the evaluation. The audit, as then conceptualized, performed a function of providing external information to Federal level program monitors.

Federal funding of education projects is generally of short duration (2-3 years). When funding is terminated, or a project reaches its conclusion, auditors no longer are utilized. Thus, audits are performed only during a very limited period of time.

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The audience for program audit reports is a restricted one. Ordinarily, evidence is presented in a final report for the expressed purpose of enabling project officers and USOE personnel to determine whether a project has complied with its legal obligations and to certify the objectivity of the project evaluation. Thus, the auditor must write a report which is satisfactory to the Federal monitor and which complies with Federal requirements, formats, etc., while at the same time maintaining the good graces of the local project director who hired the auditor and will hopefully do so again in the future.

Because it is imposed on the schools, is a temporary activity, and is reported to a limited audience, one might well conclude that the educational program audit has a minimum impact potential and holds little promise for widespread future use.

This might be the case but for several factors. Even the most optimitic educators cannot consider the credibility of schools to be flourishing. This lack of credibility and a concern for demonstrating that schools are doing an adequate job have led legislators, school boards, parents, and other concerned individuals down the thorn-strewn path of grasping at misleading information. This has been readily demonstrated by the attempts of legislators and school boards, in particular, to compare scores on standardized tests to affirm their contentions about the effectiveness of local schools. Usually, such simple-minded analyses--using tests that may not measure district goals and which do not consider differences in district input characteristics--provide misleading information. The outcome of such analyses is more confusion rather than enlightenment and the public still in a position of wanting to know "how our schools are doing."

In short, the educational program audit might remain merely a part of the complex Federal machinery were it not for the impact of a word which is heard in steadily increasing volume: ACCOUNTABILITY. Clearly, there is a growing need to present to the public, in a manner particularly suited to its concerns, verified evidence of the impact of schools upon children. The educational program audit promises to serve as a means to this end.

Many of us are aware of the functions performed by financial auditing firms in the examination of the books of major business firms in the United States and elsewhere. It has become common practice for every major company to employ a financial auditor to present a yearly report on the "financial health and well-being" of the company. These yearly reports by Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co., Price Waterhouse & Co., and other giants of the accounting field are presented at yearly stockholder meetings and represent a guarantee by an external agency that "all is well" and that the statements and assertions of management can and have been externally validated. Beyond this, the financial auditing report may go on to pinpoint deficiencies of the accounting system that might be remedied by the initiation of a new practice. Thus, one area of the yearly financial auditing report points to the adequacy of the accounting system for providing information for decision making. This system has worked well for industry and the business world--it has provided necessary assurances to the stockholders and boards of directors that the system is operating properly. Financial auditing is the appropriate tool for the examination of industry, because the main function of industry (the major output) is profit. But the major function of a governmental institution, and in particular a public educational institution, is not profit making. Certainly one must be aware of the costs associated with various aspects of the enterprise, but the major output

of public educational institutions is their impact upon children. Thus, while the publics of industrial firms seek assurances that the firm's statements about financial well-being are accurate, the publics of local school districts also must be regularly assured of the "educational well-being" of these institutions.

To consider how an educational program audit might provide this assurance, let us proceed from a number of principles. First, an educational audit is not an evaluation. Just as a financial audit is not a total accounting system, an educational audit cannot perform the total evaluation function. The institutions involved in an audit must still maintain their own educational accounting system--a system of management and evaluation. This system should provide information and allow for management decisions and change.

Second, certain modifications are necessary to adapt current auditing processes, which were developed for use in Federal projects, to a different set of constraints. For example, in contrast to present mandates, the future educational audit would serve as a tool to be used in a voluntary manner. In addition, it is suggested that the impetus for carrying out an audit would no longer originate at the Federal level, but would arise from the local district level. School district officials, anxious to lend credence to data about the review, reform, or results of various programs, could contract with an educational audit team to accomplish this mission. Another projected change in current practice would be a move away from the short-term audit. It is highly improbable that a single educational audit could encompass all programs of interest to a community. Therefore, an audit would likely become an iterative process, covering major areas of concern over a number of years. Moreover, to accommodate a different set of decision maker concerns, the nature of the audit functions themselves would have to be modified.

Audit Functions

Thus far, we have considered only the general characteristics which might be associated with future audits. It has been stated that an audit cannot provide a complete and comprehensive evaluation of every program within a district. What, then, can be done? What are the possible functions of a district-wide audit?

The audit team could be responsible for the examination and verification of district-prepared evaluations. The auditors could consider evaluation reports on existing educational programs that have either been prepared within the district or external to the district and verify the appropriateness of the procedures employed in the evaluation, as well as verify the findings or point to deficiencies where they exist. Naturally, this could take place only to the extent that such documents are available. But despite the paucity of formal evaluation documents performed by local districts, there are many attempts by districts to gather data of an "evaluative" nature. By reviewing internal evaluation procedures and results, the auditors could provide assurances about the objectivity of this information.

The audit team could collect, analyze, and evaluate a sampling of programs within the district. It has been previously mentioned that it is not possible to evaluate each and every program of a school district. Programs of highest importance or interest probably would be identified by district personnel as areas of concern to be studied during the audit. It is expected that over the course of several years most areas would have been evaluated. The design of collection procedures and the selection of instruments would be major concerns of one auditor. The auditor would also perform all analyses and could prepare the report of the evaluation. The auditor should maintain the option of selecting additional programs for study in order to ensure the integrity of the audit.

The audit team could examine and critique the adequacy of the district's management and evaluation system. As "outside" agents, the auditors are in an excellent position to recommend modifications of the system by which the district acquires and utilizes evaluation information. Thus, the third function of the future audit would be the examination of the procedures employed in the management and evaluation system of the school district and the consideration of the adequacy of that system for producing current and accurate evaluation information and for making program changes based upon that information. The auditors would ask, does the school district's administration have an adequate system for obtaining data on how the various educational programs are doing, and how might that system be improved? Alteration of existing systems would be designed to maximize constructive use of data obtained during the audit as well as information derived from other evaluative sources.

These three new educational audit functions can be referred to as evaluation verification, evaluation sampling and management and evaluation system. One could state that each of these functions helps to establish an accountability system, i.e., helps to determine the extent to which an educational institution is fulfilling its responsibilities. This would be a hollow assertion indeed, without further discussion of the meaning of accountability.

The Audit and Accountability

If a district program audit is to be examined in light of its potential usefulness in an accountability system, one must first resolve two critical issues:

Who is accountable to whom?

For what are they accountable?

My response to these questions is a proposal for goal, program and outcome accountability which has been set forth elsewhere (Alkin, 1972; Baker and Alkin, 1973). In these scheme, school boards and school district administration are held accountable to the public for the proper selection of goals ("goal accountability"). Administrators and other professional staff are held accountable to the school boards for maintaining a program appropriate for meeting stipulated objectives ("program accountability"). Teachers are held accountable to administrators and professional staff for the attainment by pupils of specified learning outcomes ("outcome accountability"). Diagram 1 depicts these three levels of accountability and the corresponding responsibilities of each group involved in the instructional process.

The Stages of an Audit

A district program audit may be conducted in a way which effectively analyzes each of the levels of accountability described above. In order to accomplish this, it is suggested that such an audit be implemented in three stages. Chart I shows each of these three stages; the operational activities of the audit team at each stage are discussed below.

Stage 1. Goal and Program Selection Audit

The audit team determines where sets of operationally defined goal statements are available at the district level. The team then analyzes the extent to which these goals are translated to various operating units within the district and whether instructional systems said to be in use in the district appear to have face validity in terms of their attaining the stipulated goals. These activities help provide information for the reporting of goal accountability and, to some extent, program accountability.

Stage 2. Program Implementation Audit

The audit team determines whether educational plans, procedures and systems stipulated in district guides, policy manuals and other documents have been implemented into school practice. This procedure is concerned with program accountability.

Stage 3. Outcome Audit

The audit team determines whether educational outputs of the system are in accord with intended educational goals and assesses whether student performance is at a satisfactory level. These activities deal with outcome accountability.

Application of the District Audit Model

The district program audit model previously discussed was implemented recently in a California school district. The district superintendent was convinced of the importance of a yearly audit to verify the "well being" of the educational system to the board of education. My colleagues and I developed the audit model and devised specific procedures for its implementation. The essential content of the audit is summarized on Chart II.

In order to keep the cost of the initial audit within reasonable limits, a two-year time span was designated for the completion of the three audit stages (goal and program, implementation, and outcome). During Year 1, two reports were written. Report I dealt exclusively with goal and program audit considerations and was primarily a review of district policy manuals, educational plans, and other documents. District and school goal and program statements were examined for comprehensiveness, clarity, and internal and intra-document consistency.

Report II, just recently completed, emphasized implementation audit issues (although some goal and program and outcome auditing was also done). The implementation audit concerned itself with whether educational plans reflecting district goals were implemented into school practice. The auditors met with the school superintendent and, to some extent, with all school baord members to ascertain which areas of interest should be the subject of this stage of the audit. Among several others, programs for the mentally gifted, special activities, and a reading support system were identified as topics of concern.

Implementation information was acquired, in part, by interviews conducted with a representative sample of randomly selected school personnel. The interviews focused on the key questions derived from district documents and agreed upon by district personnel and the auditors. Examples of these questions are as follows:

1. What is the purpose of (this program)?
2. Are all eligible students participating in (the special program)? If not, why not?

The auditors were thus responsive to the concerns of the district, but also maintained the option of adding supplemental questions to assure the objectivity of the audit. By comparing the results of the interviews with the written descriptions of the programs in question, discrepancies between implementation and documents could easily be identified.

In addition to the interview, observation instruments were designed to verify the accuracy of the interview with regard to three of the programs under study. In each case, district personnel were notified only of the date and school in which an observation would take place, but were not informed of the program to be observed.

Report III, to be completed within the next few months, will highlight outcome audit information and will treat briefly issues in the remaining two stages of the audit plan. Several areas in which district evaluative data are available will undergo evaluation verification in which the auditor examines the data, spot checks its authenticity where possible, and confirms the validity of the findings. In addition, the adequacy of the district procedures for collecting information for decision making will be examined with suggestions made by the auditors as to means of improving this evaluation information system. Finally, several program areas will be selected jointly by the auditor and the district administration and school board for the conduct of a sample evaluation by the auditor.

The projected Annual Audit Report in subsequent years will devote approximately equal time to implementation and outcome audit stages with some small consideration each year to goal and program auditing. Chart II depicts the overall District Audit Implementation Plan as described above.

Clearly, there is a new mechanism for satisfying the demands for demonstrating accountability of total school programs--THE DISTRICT PROGRAM AUDIT.

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Diagram 1

THE THREE LEVELS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

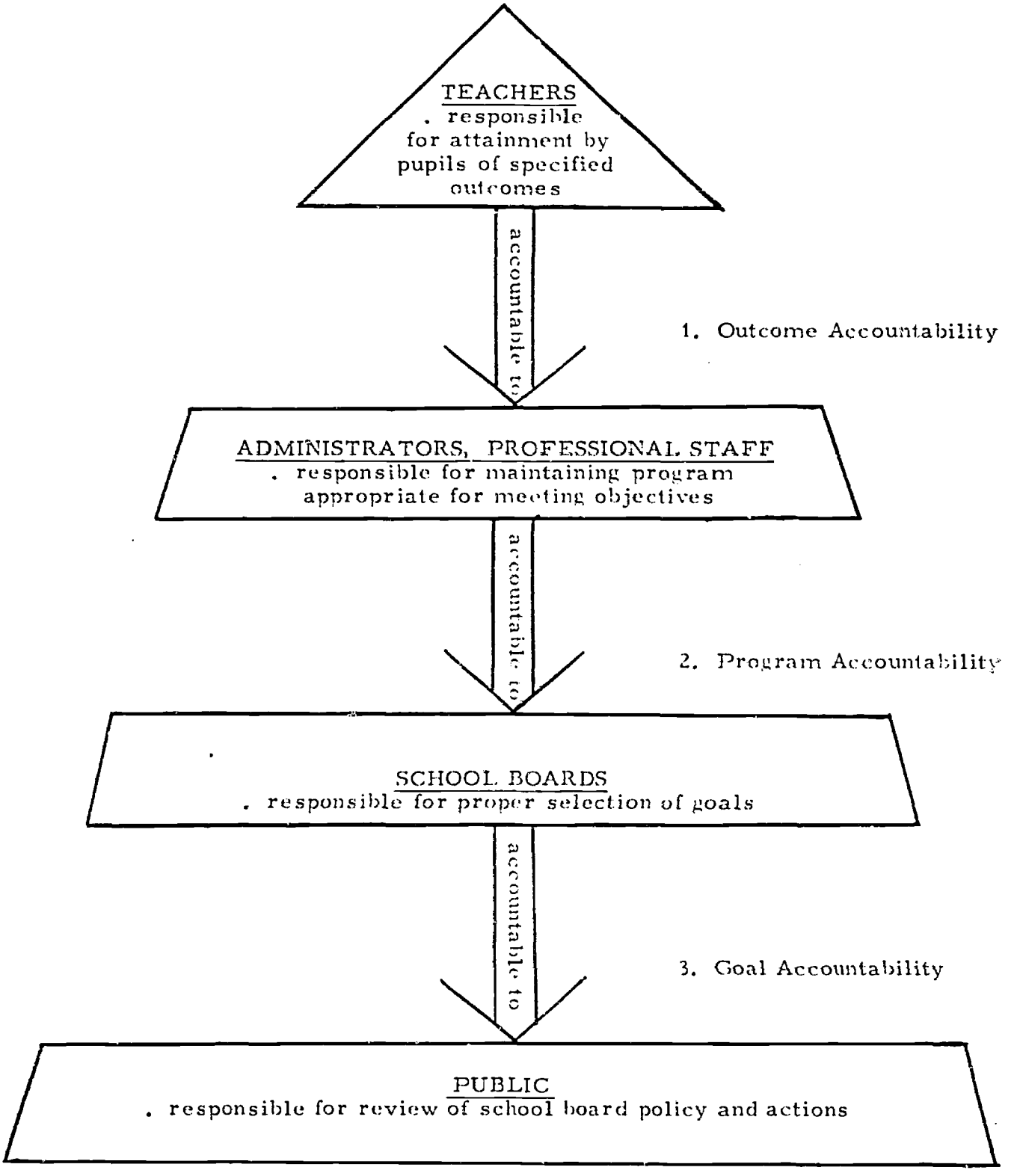

CHART 1

EDUCATIONAL AUDIT FUNCTIONS/STAGES

Stage	Function		
	Evaluation Verification	Evaluation Sampling	Management and Evaluation System
Goal and Program Audit			
Implementation Audit			
Outcome Audit			

CHART II

DISTRICT AUDIT IMPLEMENTATION PLAN