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ABSTRACT

The Maryland Alternative Accountability Pilot Project is described and analyzed. First, the conceptual framework on which the project was based is presented. This includes the background and circumstances that provided the impetus, project goals, resource allocation, and project management. Each of the following phases is then briefly discussed: development of school-level goals and objectives, development of the school-based assessment techniques, the implementation of the assessment, and the data recording. The roles of the consultants, principals, and teachers within each of these phases are described. (Author)

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IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY: THE MARYLAND EXPERIENCE

by

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C O N T E N T S

1. THE MARYLAND ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAM

Accountability means many things to many people. To some it means getting rid of incompetent teachers; to others it means testing; still others view it as a system for improving the quality of education. As of 1974, thirty states had enacted legislation which contained approaches to accountability. (1) Many of these laws deal with the assessment of programs and personnel with an ultimate goal of improving the performance of learners.

Maryland is one of the states that enacted a rather comprehensive accountability law in 1972. This was done in response to a growing public concern about the quality of education and a need for better information about what students learn in schools.

The purposes of this Act are:

> .....to assure that educational programs operated in the public schools of Maryland lead to the attainment of established objectives for education, to provide information for accurate analysis of the costs associated with public education programs and to provide information for an analysis of the differential effectiveness of instructional programs. (2)

The State Department of Education, charged with implementing this law, developed a four stage plan for this purpose. This included:

1. The development of statewide goals for reading , writing, and mathematics.
2. The preparation of local goals and objectives in conformity with the state goals by each of the 24 county school systems.
3. The identification and administration of instruments (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and Maryland Functional Reading Test) to assess achievement of these goals in four grades.
4. The preparation of an annual report on the implementation of the program, the results of assessment and further recommendations.

II. INCEPTION AND PURPOSES OF THE ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY PROGRAM

Almost from its inception this program was criticized, particularly by teachers. The basis for their objections was fourfold.

1. The goals and objectives were from the top down (state to local) which were not always suitable for local needs.
2. The burden of accountability (blame for poor achievement) was implicitly placed on teachers rather than being shared by others that influenced education.
3. The assessment instrument did not accurately measure what was being taught in all schools.
4. In spite of a regression analysis to adjust scores for certain inherent variables, test results are not necessarily comparable among schools.

Discussions between representatives of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), the Maryland State Teachers Association (MSTA) and the National Education Association (NEA) resulted in the planning and joint funding of the Maryland Alternative Accountability Pilot Project (MAAPP). The philosophy underlying this project was that the individual school (staff, students, parents and community) should determine what they want to accomplish, how they will assess these accomplishments and how they will report the results to interested parties.

The major purposes of the MAAPP were:

1. To increase community involvement, particularly in goal setting, and develop more meaningful communication with various aspects of the community.
2. To develop and/or select alternative approaches to assessment.
3. To utilize assessment results to improve instruction.

III. SCHOOLS, FUNDING AND MANAGEMENT

All local school systems were informed of the project and invited to participate. Seven schools from four different systems chose to participate (five elementary, one high school and one special education center). One elementary school later withdrew. Each school received $1500 to use in purchasing materials, hiring substitutes to release teachers, paying teachers for extra services or to otherwise use in conducting the project. In addition, each one received eight days of services from an assessment consultant. These monies, plus others for the overall operation of the project, were provided jointly by the three sponsoring organizations (MSDE, MSTA and NEA).

Initially, representatives of these three agencies cooperatively managed the project. They provided general guidelines for schools to follow and jointly met with the principal and staffs of the participating schools to assist them in their task. A graduate student from the state university was employed as a part time field coordinator to keep records, foster communications and assist in expediting work. However, changes in personnel and schedule conflicts made this form of management unworkable. Therefore, it was decided to make the MSDE representative the project manager to coordinate activities and administer the project. The manager, working with the assessment consultants and the field coordinator proved to be a successful way of operating the project.

IV. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The MAAPP was conceptualized as an eight-stage model. This model is depicted in Figure 1. (3) Stage one is the development and refinement of objectives in the three basis areas of accountability (reading, writing and mathematics). In essence, this was a curriculum development task. These objectives formed the scope and sequence for these three areas and provided a basis for selecting the content to be taught as well as the criteria for evaluation.

The second stage was broken down into two activities: (A) the identification of possible ways to assess each activity and (B) the organization or classification of each objective according to these various ways of assessment.

Stage three called for the utilization of the previous stage in actually selecting or developing the assessment instruments.

Stage four required schools to plan who to assess and when.

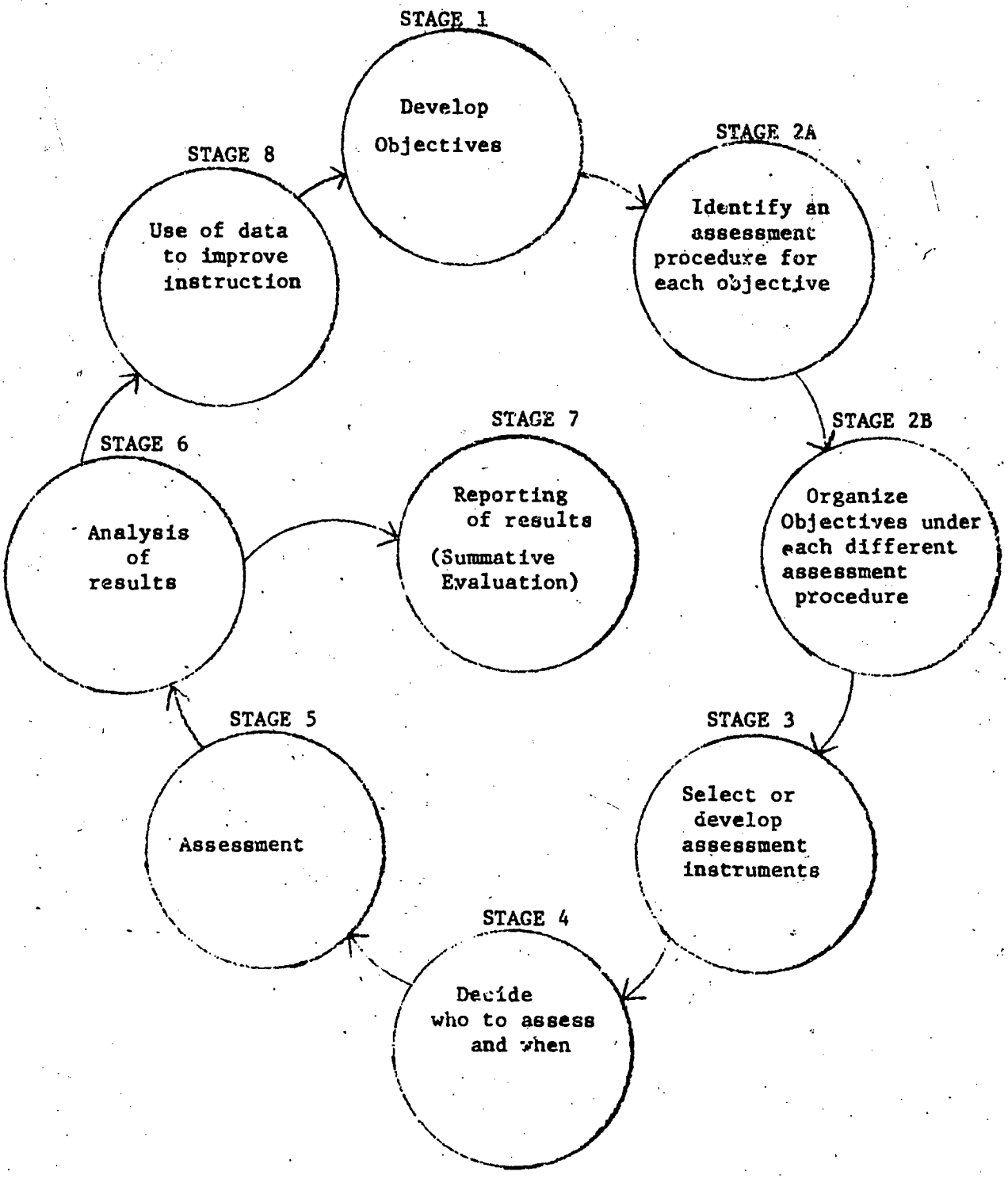
A decision had to be made whether to assess every student on every objective, to sample either students or objectives, or both. The step also necessitated a decision on whether to evaluate all students in a relatively short period of time or to spread the assessment process over the entire year.

The final stage (eight) is the primary reason for the existence of an accountability program; the use of these results to improve instruction.

The balance of this paper will be devoted to describing each of these stages as they were developed and implemented in the six pilot schools. The successful procedures developed by various schools will be highlighted as well as the problems that arose. Recommendations will be made based on this experience for others who may wish to use a similiar plan.

Figure 1

MARYLAND ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY PILOT PROJECT ASSESSMENT MODEL



V. DEVELOPMENT OF OBJECTIVES (stage One)

All schools in the state were required to write objectives for reading, writing and mathematics that were consistant with the goals of their county and the state. In the MAAPP schools careful consideration had to be given to "the measurability" of these objectives since the schools themselves would be responsible for their assessment. Schools in this project were also strongly encouraged to involve parents and members of the community in the process. (3) All schools involved parents and/or members of the community in the early part of this task. Some schools organized small on-going groups of parents and teachers to set goals. Others mailed invitations to selected participants. One held a mass meeting of parents to get involvement. Two schools used a mail questionnaire to get parents' responses. While community involvement was generally good at the onset, it tended to atrophy as the work got down to the "nitty gritty" of specific objective writing. At this point, teachers and consultants took over the job.

Some schools organized by grouping teachers according to grades, levels or departments (depending on individual school's organization), while others organized according to subject areas across grades. Whichever pattern was used for the primary writing task, meetings were held using the opposite organization to provide for communication and articulation. For example, if teachers at a grade level met to write objectives in one or more areas, representatives of each grade met to articulate sequence between grades.

Small task groups proved to be most productive. Meeting times varied among the schools. Some met during the day using substitutes to cover classes, some met at the end of the school day and some meetings were held on Saturday. The latter seemed to be most productive as teachers were fresh and free

from concern about their classes.

This task was not an easy one for the schools. Although it was suppose to be completed during the first half of 1975, when the assessment consultants were employed in August they found considerable work needed to be done to make the objectives "assessable". This included not only cleaning up the statement of the objectives, but also in helping teachers clarify what they wanted to teach and ironing out duplication and gaps between grades. The input of the consultants was most valuable in this process. The task was not completed until the end of 1975 for most schools and even ran into the spring of 1976 for some.

Although the task was difficult, some valuable outcomes accrued. Firs teachers learned several things: to write objectives in measurable terms; more about their subject matter, particularly its organization; and they improved their communication with one another, parents and the administration. Second, a more complete and better organized curriculum evolved from this process.

A comparison of the objectives produced at the elementary schools indicates a high degree of similarity. The question must be raised if this process of "rediscovering the wheel" is worth the effort. One recommendation that could resolve this issue is that a bank of objectives be collected at the state level and made available to local schools. They would have the privilege of selecting objectives from this bank, creating their own or doing some of each.

VI. IDENTIFICATION, ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES. (stage two and three)

Stage two A (identification of possible ways to assess the objectives) and two B (organizing objectives according to assessment procedures) were neither difficult tasks to accomplish nor were they extremely useful. While a list of possible ways of assessing each objective was quickly developed and objectives classified according to this list, not until the teachers got into the tasks of selecting or developing specific instruments (stage three) did the whole thing begin to fit together. Only in the special education center, where the decision to rely heavily on check lists was made in advance, did stage two prove to be very useful. As teachers explored existing instruments and worked on development of their own, preliminary decisions were either changed or reinforced.

The task of selecting and developing instruments for assessment was as time consuming, although probably not as frustrating, as developing the objectives. In many schools teachers reviewed standardized tests, criterion-referenced tests associated with textbook series and criterion-referenced items obtained from the Instructional Objectives Exchange. Some items were selected from these sources. In addition, teachers developed criterion-referenced items and observational checklists for certain objectives. (4)

Other than the heavy time commitment, no other problems seemed to be evident in this process. Many teachers reported that their work on this task improved their writing skills and increased their understanding of the relationship between objectives and the evaluation of student achievement

VII. WHO, WHAT AND WHEN (stage Four)

A major concern in this area was whether or not to assess every student on every objective or to sample some students and/or objectives. Despite the work involved, teachers favored assessing every child. Their goal was to obtain diagnostic data on students which could be used for planning future instruction as well as for reporting to parents and others.

While teachers also favored assessing students on all objectives, the time pressure created by the number of start up tasks in the initial year made this impossible in most schools. Therefore, most of them sampled the number of objectives upon which they would assess students with anticipation of expanding the number they would assess the next year.

The time of assessment was another issue that had to be resolved. Most teachers agreed that on-going assessment throughout the year was desirable. This would enable them to use the results as feedback to themselves, students, parents and other parties so that changes could be made that would facilitate learning. However, this was not possible during the initial year when the preparation for assessment consumed the first six months. Some schools chose to assess children over a few days period; others made it an on-going process lasting up to two months. Some set aside a portion of the school day for assessment; others observed the child's behavior and work products throughout the day.

While most of the effort went into student assessment, the larger concept of accountability as responsibility forced some consideration to be given to who was responsible for the success or failure of students. Teachers were obviously reluctant to accept total responsibility for student achievement when so many other factors such as family, community

support, school resources and administration impinged on this outcome. Unfortunately, time constraints and priorities established by the model left little opportunity to consider this idea. Only one school did anything about it. In this school, two instruments were developed - one for evaluation of the principal and one for teacher evaluation. Teachers anonymously completed the principal evaluation form and teachers utilized the other form to perform a self-evaluation. Although these steps were small, they at least initiated action on a "total accountability program".

VIII. ASSESSMENT (stage Five)

At this stage the instruments and procedures developed in the previous two stages were implemented. In most schools objectives were evaluated on some form of a "mastered - not mastered" basis. Some schools used a modification of this by including a "partially learned" category. One school used only a percentage correct system.

Criteria were established, if they were not inherent in the objectives, to determine what was meant by mastery. Record forms were devised and utilized to collect the data on each child. In most cases, these took the form of class summary sheets on which each child's performance on each objective was recorded.

IX. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS (stage six)

Results were analyzed both individually and by groups. Some schools kept records only on each student indicating the number of objectives mastered or the score each obtained on given tests. Others grouped these data and determined the percentages of each grade that mastered each objective or the average score and variability for each group on each test.

Some schools hand-scored the assessments at the classroom level while other used IBM answer sheets with computer scoring.

X. REPORTING THE RESULTS (stage seven)

By June 1976 the majority of MAAPP schools had reached Stage seven, reporting the school level and individual student assessment results. The sponsoring agencies presented MAAPP results to the appropriate legislative bodies and to the community at large while the schools concentrated on ways to explain their programs and results to parents. Some schools held voluntary parent conferences with teachers to discuss the students' achievement. As an alternative to the time-consuming task of individual conferences, several schools planned evening meetings with parents. During these sessions, the principal and teachers reported on assessment results and explained how the information would improve educational planning and instruction. Another approach to reporting results was a take-home report card, also called an "objective mastery card", which indicates each child's level of achievement of objectives assessed. One school intends eventually to dispense with its regular report card and replace it with the "objective mastery card." These assessment results remain in each students' folder as the student progresses through the skills required at each grade level.

Presenting the results in an understandable fashion is a key to the success of this program. Parents, students and the public at large have for so long been conditioned to broad subject letter grades and comparison test scores (norm-referenced) that the new mastery of objective type of evaluation (criterion-referenced) requires considerable explanation.

XI. USE OF DATA TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION (Stage Eight)

This final stage of the MAAPP was only touched upon by some schools because time ran out for the school year. A few teachers in schools where testing was continuous over a period of two months indicated they used some of the early results to reteach some objectives. Other schools indicated that some objectives in which students did not do so well were marked for special attention the following year. Some schools remarked that they not only planned to look at instruction, but also at the objectives themselves, the assessment instruments and the record system.

Two schools planned summer workshops with the anticipation of completing the assessment development tasks and reviewing the results of the past year.

It was probably too much to expect a school staff to complete the entire eight steps in one year. However, a sufficient amount was accomplished to show the viability of the model.

XII. OTHER ASPECTS OF PROJECT

There were several other aspects of the project that contributed to its success. One was meetings of the assessment consultants, field coordinator and project manager. At these meetings ideas were exchanged, time tables set, problems discussed and a plan for the evaluation of the project developed. No attempt was made to develop uniformity among the schools; in fact diversity was encouraged in order to see what worked. However, the shared expertise of this group was helpful in resolving many issues.

Another key factor was the role of the field coordinator. This person spent considerable time communicating with the schools, the consultants and the manager, expediting many details.

The project manager provided overall leadership to the project. The enthusiasm and perseverance of this individual was central in keeping people moving when other priorities attempted to get in the way.

A final factor that was helpful in moving the project was a series of intra-school meetings. Principals and key teachers of the participating schools met to share ideas, discuss problems and mutually reinforce each other.

Two disappointing aspects of the project were the lack of input and concern of representatives of the sponsoring agencies (other than the one which the project manager represented), and the county level personnel. After the assessment consultants were brought on board, the sponsoring groups seemed to feel they were relieved of all responsibility except funding and publicizing the fact that it was "their" project. Other than

level of administration. More "drum beating and horn tooting" by the school and staff may have altered this, but they were too busy with the task at hand.

XIII MAJOR PROBLEMS

There were several major problems that arose during the project. These included time, financial assistance, technical assistance, consistent leadership and follow up.

The process of developing objectives, which was tantamount to a major curriculum revision, was extremely time consuming. Part of this was due to the lack of expertise and leadership at the school level during the initial phase of the project. This was remedied in part when the assessment consultants started working. However, a good deal of it had to do with the scope of the task as envisioned by the authors of the project. It was assumed that the curriculum in each school was in order and the objectives of this curriculum needed only to be translated into behavioral terms. Unfortunately, the curriculum in most American schools is not in good order. The scope and sequence is not well laid out and many teachers are "doing their own thing". Many curricular problems had to be resolved in these schools before the objective task could really be done well. Some problems were resolved by communication among staff, some by consensus, some by compromise and some by majority vote. Any group contemplating a project similar to the MAAPP should be aware that a sound curriculum precedes assessment. The commitment needed to do this requires more than a few hours of released time or an afternoon once a week.

Time was also a problem in accomplishing the other stages. The fact that most schools only assessed a sample of their objectives indicates

the crunch they were in. Hindsight would suggest that a full calendar year, including a summer, should be devoted to curriculum and assessment development before implementing the project even on a pilot basis.

Financial assistance was a second problem. The $39,000 invested in the project produced a tremendous amount of output. Additional funds were needed to buy more time, particularly for staff and consultants. Some of the shortcomings of the project may be traced to this. One school withdrew from the project because they felt they could not "complete a creditable project with the time and resources available".

It became obvious early in the project that teachers lacked the technical expertise to do a good job in curriculum and assessment development. This should not be construed as a criticism of teachers. Their job is to teach, not write curriculum and construct tests. The employment of consultants who worked with the staff in doing the job resolved this issue. Consultants for such a task must have not only the technical knowledge, but be willing to "roll up their sleeves" and get down to work with the staff. Much of their task consisted of providing examples, locating resources, technical editing and revision and actually doing some of the writing.

Changes in leadership proved to be another major problem. The resignation and replacement of the field coordinator and two shifts in the administrator of the Maryland Accountability Program, who represented MSDE, interrupted the project. Schools became confused and questioned the commitment of the agencies. However, the consummation of the position of project manager, the retention of a new field coordinator and the employment of consultants, all of whom stayed with the project for the entire pilot year provided the consistency needed to enable the schools to accomplish the great amount of work they did.

At the completion of the pilot year, it was agreed that the schools would continue refining objectives, developing the rest of the assessment tasks and using the results to improve instruction. One school received a county grant to do this in a summer workshop. Two factors interferred with this plan, however, Although the sponsoring agencies agreed to fund the schools for some expenses and consultant help during the follow-up year, it was not forthcoming. The second factor was the resignation of the project manager to take another position. His replacement did not have the same enthusiasm for the project. This lack of follow up is having a distinct affect upon the schools commitment to continue work on the task.

XIV EVALUATION

The purpose of the MAAPP was to demonstrate how an accountability program could work from the grass roots level. An evaluation was designed and conducted by the manager and consultants to determine how well it worked. This is the subject of a second paper to follow. This paper has described the process, the resources and the products, illustrating some of the success and some of the problems encountered.

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