ABSTRACT
              This paper describes a survey-based needs assessment
method for school districts using multiple constituency groups. The
constituency groups included are: the general public, community
leaders, parents, students, graduates, and professional educators.
The method requires polling the groups using telephone surveys,
mailed surveys, or group administered surveys. Many survey questions
can be used on all survey forms with minor modifications. This
general procedure was applied to two Alabama School Systems wanting
broad input on future district plans and their financing. In both
cases the general public and community leaders were surveyed via the
telephone. Other groups were surveyed via hand-carried and mailed
questionnaires. The survey forms were developed through central
office staff brainstorming activities. The boards of educations
reviewed the issues before their incorporation into the instruments.
Issues incorporated included physical plant, supporting services,
staff personnel, pupil personnel, curriculum, community relations,
and school finance. There was much more agreement among constituency
groups than disagreement. The participation of multiple constituency
groups and its attendant publicity resulted in a more favorable
environment for change. (Author/BS)

TRIANGULATING SCHOOL DISTRICT NEEDS

WITH MULTIPLE CONSTITUENCY GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

Triangulating School District Needs with Multiple Constituency Groups

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School districts often desire input from various constituency groups in
conducting needs assessments. The two predominant methods for acquiring this
input are public hearings and surveys.   While public hearings are certainly
the most cost effective of the two procedures, properly conducted surveys
reach a much more representative cross section of stake holders in the
educational process. Further, public hearings are subject to the biasing
influences of small but vocal constituency groups. The purpose of this paper
is to describe a survey based needs assessment method using multiple
constituency groups and provide two examples of its implementation.

The needs assessment survey method requires the polling of multiple
constituency groups using both telephone and survey procedures. Constituency
groups should   include the general public, community leaders, parents,
students, professional educators, and graduates of the school system. The
community at large and community leaders can best be polled using the
telephone survey method. The other constituency groups can be polled using
mailed or hand-delivered survey forms. Although each constituency group can
provide unique insights into future school system planning, much of the
information requested from these groups is similar. Thus, many of the survey
questions can be used on all of the survey forms with minor modifications.

This general procedure was applied to two separate school systems. Both
school systems wished to gain information from a broad range of constituency
groups concerning future district plans and the financing of them. Members of
the community at large and community leaders in both cases were surveyed via
the telephone.   Other constituency groups were surveyed via hand-carried and
mailed questionnaires.   The survey forms were developed using brainstorming
activities of the central office staff. Boards of education participated in
the process by reviewing the issues which were generated before they were
incorporated into the survey instruments.   Issues represented in the
instruments included physical plant, supporting services, staff personnel,
pupil personnel, curriculum, community relations, and school finance.

There was much more agreement among constituency groups than disagree-
ment. In one school district, the various constituency groups agreed not only
about which future programs of the district should be supported but what new
taxes should be instituted to finance them.   Further, the participation from
multiple constituency groups and its attendant publicity resulted in a more
favorable environment for change.

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TRIANGULATING SCHOOL DISTRICT NEEDS
WITH MULTIPLE CONSTITUENCY GROUPS

School districts often desire input from various constituency groups in conducting needs assessments. The two predominant methods for acquiring this input are public hearings and surveys. While public hearings are certainly the most cost effective of the two procedures, properly conducted surveys reach a much more representative cross section of stake holders in the educational process. Further, public hearings are subject to the biasing influences of small but vocal constituency groups. The purpose of this paper is to describe a survey-based needs assessment method using multiple constituency groups; provide two examples of its implementation; and discuss its advantages, disadvantages, and implications.

The paper is presented under three headings. First, the methods of the needs assessment surveys are described. This is followed by a summary of the results from the surveys. Finally, a discussion of the advantages, disadvantges, and implications is provided.

Method

The methods described in this paper were used for completing two needs assessment studies. These studies were conducted for the Talladega County (Alabama) Schools and the Alexander City (Alabama) Schools. Talladega County is a relatively small school district in terms of pupil population (about 9,000), but is spread out over a large area. Alexander City is even smaller (about 3,500 students) and they are concentrated in the city limits of Alexander City, Alabama.

The methods are described under several headings. First, the methods used to identify the issues are described followed by the methods used to

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identify the constituency groups. The sampling methods, instrument development, and data collection are also described.

Issue Identification

The first task in conducting the needs assessments was the identification of issues to be addressed by the assessment. The global objectives of the assessment were to determine potential goals for the improvement of the schools and to identify the least objectionable methods for financing them. It was felt that the best source of information concerning these issues was the people who deal with them every day, the school and central office administrators of the school systems.

The superintendent's staff, central office staff, school principals, and others identified by the superintendent participated in a "brainstorming" activity to generate the assessment issues. This activity was designed to cover the various categories in which issues might be grouped. The categories included physical plant, supporting services, staff development, pupil personnel, curriculum, community relations, and school finance. A category labeled "Others" was also provided to cover issues which might not fit into any of the labeled categories.

The individuals identified to participate in the brainstorming session were assembled and briefed by the superintendent on the general goals of the assessment. The brainstorming instrument was distributed and the participants were instructed in its use. Each of the participants was then given time to complete the form.

The forms were content analyzed and the results were presented to the school superintendents. At that time, the superintendents and their respective staffs were given the opportunity to add or delete issues as they saw fit. Other issues which might be considered were suggested at that time.

The final list of issues became the basis for the development of the various assessment instruments.

Identifying the Constituency Groups

The needs assessment survey was to be based on responses from as broad a cross-section of the populations as possible. It was recognized early that the schools have many different constituency groups, each with a stake in the quality of education provided. It was also recognized that these various constituency groups are represented by different proportions of the population and have varying ideas about the future goals of the schools. In order to take these potentially differing opinions into account, six constituency groups were identified for the study. The six identified groups were the community at large, community leaders, parents of school children, high school graduates, current students, and professional school personnel. Obviously, these constituency groups may overlap one another.

Each of the constituency groups was defined operationally. The community was defined as all adult persons living idn the school district for at least one month prior to the survey. Community leaders were defined as individuals identified by the superintendent's staff, principals, and others who exert an influence over others in the community. These leaders may be political, business, religious, or other. Parents were defined as parents of school students who participate in the Parent-Teachers Association (PTA) in Talladega County or all parents of children in Alexander City. Graduates were defined as individuals who graduated from one of the high schools during 1981. In Talladega high school seniors represent students and in Alexander City all high school students as they would have had the most extensive experience in the schools. Professional personnel were defined as all certified personnel employed by the two school systems.

Selection of the Sample

Samples were selected from each of the constituency groups defined in the previous section.   Criteria for sample selection included obtaining a representative sample from each constituency group and providing reasonable control of the accuracy of the results. These criteria were weighed against the cost of obtaining scientifically defensible samples from each constituency group.   The specific sampling method used with each constituency group is described below.

Community sample· A random sample of 856 members of the Talladega County community and 405 members of the Alexander City community were sampled randomly by phone using a random digit dialing technique. A more detailed description is provided in the Data Collection section. The sample sizes were based on   the numbers required to obtain estimates of the population proportions to within specified bounds.

Community leaders·   The community leaders were a select group of residents identified by school personnel as being influential in the community.   In all, the names and phone numbers of 74 Talladega community leaders and 113 Alexander City community leaders were available. Twenty-five of the ˠalladega leaders and 84 of the Alexander City leaders were selected on an as available basis for an extensive telephone interview.

Parents.   As previously noted, parents of Talladega County School students were defined as those who attended a PTA meeting.   Each parent who attended the initial PTA meeting of the 1983-84 school year was given the opportunity to complete a survey form.   One thousand completed and usable survey forms were returned to the Evaluation and Assessment Laboratory for processing.   In Alexander City, the population was stratified by grade.   A random sample of 20 students was selected from each grade level. The parents of these children became the sample of parents. Additional random selections

were made when parents had more than one child in the sample. One parent for each child included in the sample was asked to return a survey form.

Graduates. Proportional random samples of 100 1981 high school graduates of high schools (stratified by schools in Talladega County) were sampled. After four followups, 75 completed and usable surveys were available for processing in Talladega County while 62 were available in Alexander City.

Students. Students in the survey are represented by a sample of 447 high school seniors in Talladega County and by a random sample of 142 high school students in Alexander City. This represents over 77% of the total senior population for Talladega County and 20% of the high school students for Alexander City.

Professional personnel. All professional personnel in both systems were given the opportunity to complete a survey form. Four hundred and three completed and usable forms were returned in Talladega Countyd, which represented 86% of the population. One hundred and sixty-three usable forms were returned in Alexander City which represented approximately 81% of the total professional staff. Since the samples were voluntary, the results are valid for the responding personnel. This is not a major problem as at least 81% of the population responded in each case.

Development of the Instruments

The various survey instruments were based on the issues resulting from the brainstorming sessions reported previously. Several steps were used in their development. The first step was to determine which issues were to be included on each instrument. The second step was to determine the type of survey (group administered, mail, phone, etc.) to use with each constituency group. The third step involved the construction of the items for each questionnaire. In the fourth step, school representatives reviewed the survey

instruments and provided suggestions. The fifth step was revising and pilot testing the instruments. The pilot tested instruments were then revised further based on the results of piloting and final forms were prepared for use. The community and community leaders instruments went through a further review by the polling organization personnel before they were used.

Assigning issues to instruments. The determination of which issues were to be included on which instruments was based primarily on logic. For example, whereas financial issues would be very important to the community and community leaders, it might not be advantageous to collect data on these issues from students or graduates. On the other hand, students and graduates might provide valuable information on the usefulness of aspects of the program while the community and community leaders might have little or no knowledge of o. these matters. In general, issues were included on the survey forms for each constituency group for which they might be applicable. Some of the issues were addressed by all six constituency groups.

Survey types. Three survey methods were considered for each constituency group. These methods were group administration, administration by mail, and administration by telephone. While telephone surveys usually provide a higher rate of return than mail, they also cost considerably more to complete or. a per capita basis. The least expensive method is to administer the surveys in a group, distributing and collecting them when the constituency groups are congregated. The final choices were made by balancing the potential gains of each method with the costs and other practical concerns. Table 1 describes the method finally selected for each constituency group.

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Table 1

Survey Method Used by Constituency Groups

Constituency group	Alexander City survey method	Talladega survey method
Community	Telephone*	Telephone*
Community leaders	Telephone*	Telephone*
Parents	Hand carried/ mail return	Group administered
Graduates	Mail	Mail
Students	Group administered	Group administered
Professional personnel	School mail	School mail

*Conducted by polling organization.

Item construction. Three major item types (multiple choice, Likert, and pair-comparison) were used on the survey forms. Multiple choice items were used to solicit respondents' selection of one or more choices from several alternatives. Likert-type items require the respondent to select a point on a scale providing for a range of responses (e.g., selecting their level of agreement from among strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, and strongly disagree).

Pair comparison items were used to avoid having the respondents provide a ranking from among numerous choices. Using pair comparison items, respondents merely select one option from two rather than ranking three, four, or more options. This method allows the choices to be ranked by considering all of the pairs of choices.

Revision, pilot testing, and production of instruments. Each instrument was reviewed by the respective superintendents and their staffs before it was

used. The instruments were also pilot tested with graduate and undergraduate classes at The University of Alabama. Evaluation and Assessment Laboratory staff reviewed all of the comments and pilot testing results and made modifications where appropriate. The polling organization staff further examined and modified the format of the community/community leaders survey for telephone use. The instruments were then reproduced in appropriate quantities for use. Various sizes, formats, and colors were employed to facilitate their intended use.

Data Collection

Due to the varying availability of the different constituency groups, the data collection procedures differed widely. This section describes those procedures as they apply to each constituency group. In cases where the data collection methods were similar for two constituency groups, the procedure used is explained for both together.

Community and community leaders. The telephone survey method was used to collect data from members of the community at large and community leaders. A polling organization designed and conducted the telephone interviews. The polling organization is a member of the Network of State Public Polls and subscribes to the operating principles adopted by the National Council on Public Polls. They have conducted polls under contract to several well-known national polling groups. The procedures used for the data collection for the community at large and the community leaders are noted below.

The first step in the process was the training of the interviewers. The polling organization maintains a cadre of interviewers trained in the process of telephone interviewing in general. The interviewers selected for these polls received specific training on the instruments they were to use for these

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assessments.   Further, they were provided with a list of definitions of terms used on the survey form.

The surveys were conducted using a random digit dailing technique. Random digits for a local exchange were dialed until a valid number was reached. Then, all of the numbers in the cluster were called. This process was repeated until a designated number of people had been polled.

When someone in a household answered the phone, the next step was to sample randomly an adult in that household. The method used insured that the distribution of males and females interviewed would be similar to that in the population.

The polling organization conducted its interviews using 10 touch-tone telephones equipped with standard receivers as well as headsets. They are located in individual sound-deadened work stations found in a room equipped with a telephone monitoring station. While the interviews are being conducted, a supervisor listens to each interviewer on a rotating basis. Feedback is given when necessary.

The methods for conducting the telephone surveys of the community leaders were essentially the same as those for the community at large except for the method of sampling. The individuals interviewed were sampled randomly. However, when a randomly sampled individual was not available, a randomly sampled alternate was used.

Graduates. Random samples of 100 graduates of high schools in Talladega and Alexander City were selected for survey from a total population of approximately 500 and 182 graduates respectively. These graduates were each sent (1) a letter by mail explaining the survey, (2) a letter of support from the superintendent, (3) a questionnaire, and (4) an addressed, stamped return envelope. Envelopes returned unopened marked "address unknown" or "undeliverabale" were replaced with randomly selected alternates.

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Three weeks after the initial mailing, a reminder post card was sent to those not yet responding. Two weeks after sending the reminder cards, an attempt was made to contact by phone the addressees who had still not responded. New materials were sent to those who indicated they lost them or did not receive them. After one additional followup attempt, 75 completed and usable returns were available for analysis from Talladega and 62 from Alexander City.

Students and parents. In Talladega, both students and parents were surveyed using group administrations. The survey forms were handed out and collected at group sessions. All seniors in school and present in their homeroom classes on the day the surveys were done (winter, 1984) participated in the surveys. The homeroom teachers handed out and collected the survey forms on the same day. Students who were absent or rot in the homeroom for whatever reason did not participate. Of the approximately 570 senior surveys, 447 were completed which were available for analysis. In Alexander City, all high school students were in the population. Of the 698 high school students, 163 completed returns were available.

Parents who attended the initial PTA meeting of the 1983-84 school year at each school in Talladega County were given the opportunity to complete a survey form. It was felt that parents who attend PTA are the most interested in schools and the first PTA meeting of each year is usually the heaviest attended of the year. The survey forms were distributed and collected at the initial meeting of each school's PTA. One thousand completed and usable survey forms were available for analysis.

In Alexander City, parents of the randomly sampled children in grades K-12 were sent a survey form via their children. Included in the packet were a letter of explanation from the director of the Evaluation and Assessment Laboratory, a letter of support from the superintendent, the survey form

itself, and a stamped envelope addressed directly to the Evaluation and Assessment Laboratory. All surveys included a code number for followup purposes. Phone followups were conducted for those whose phone numbers were known. Of the parents surveyed, 120 completed and usable survey forms were available for analysis.

Professional personnel. All of the professional, certified personnel in each system were provided with a survey form. They were asked to return the completed survey form to the central office via the school mail service. Within two weeks, 403 surveys were completed and available for analysis in Talladega and 163 were available in Alexander City.

Results

The results are summarized first for the Talladega County study and then for the Alexander City schools. The results are divided into those applicable across two or more constituency groups followed by results unique to specific constituency groups. Results related to sex and/or race are also noted.

Talladega County

Results across constituency groups. A clear majority of all the constituency groups asked (graduates were not asked) supported offering more advanced programs for gifted students. The percentage of support ranged from 81.7% for students to 100% for community leaders. The expansion of computer literacy and computer technology programs was also supported by a substantial majority of all respondents. The percentage of support for expanding these programs was 91.5% for parents, 90.5% for professional personnel, 89.3% for students, 86.9% for the community, 84.0% for community leaders, and 65.4% for graduates. Substantial majorities within each of the constituency groups also supported providing students with assistance in dealing with personal and family problems and offering a comprehensive health care program. A solid

majority of parents and graduates were satisfied with Talladega County bus service.

Often a majority of the respondents will approve all potential programs when they are asked only if they approve or disapprove. In order to further discriminate among preferences for these programs, data were collected in a manner which allowed the options to be compared and ranked (from four of the constituency groups) (parents, professional personnel, community, and community leaders). Three of the four constituency groups ranked vocational programs (parents, community, and community leaders) and counseling services (parents, professional personnel, and community) either as a first or second priority. All four constituency groups agreed that consolidating small schools was the lowest (ninth) priority for those options offered.

Data were collected from three of the constituency groups (parents, community, and community leaders) which allowed four financial options to be ranked (increase county sales tax, increase property tax, sell bonds, reduce expenditures). It is noteworthy that all three groups picked increase county sales tax as their first option even over reduced expenditures. The least popular option for all these groups was increase property tax. It should be pointed out that these data were collected prior to the increase in the county sales tax. However, it may demonstrate the wisdom of that decision.

Results unique to specific groups. Some issues were raised only with one or two constituency groups. The more noteworthy of these results are presented in this section.

A clear majority of the community and community leaders (68.7% and 60.0%) felt that students' poor performance in school was due either to the student or the student's home life. Parents tended to blame the student (54.8%) or the student's home life (38.9%) rather than the schools. The community and community leaders opposed either extending the school day or the school year.

While 66% of the seniors indicated that they planned to continue their education after high school, about 68% of the 1981 graduates indicated that they had already continued their education (33.3% at 4-year colleges, 24.0% at 2-year colleges, and 9.3% at vocational or trade schools).

The respondents reported a degree of knowledge about the Talladega County Schools which varied from not very much to quite a bit. It is interesting to note where they obtained that knowledge. The community tends to find out about the schools from the newspapers while most of the community leaders obtain their knowledge directly from school officials. Parents find out about the schools through their children and the PTA.

Results by sex and race. Males, females, blacks, and whites were broadly represented in each of the constituency group surveys with a possible excep ion being community leaders. For the most part, the results were similar for different sex and race groups. This section points out the primary areas of disagreement among these groups.

The community leaders' responses did not differ meaningfully by sex or race. However, only two respondents identified themselves as black while two others chose the "did not know/no answer" option. While blacks were well represented in the general community survey, not one response was consistently related to the sex or race of the respondents.

More black parent respondents than white parent respondents felt that all schools should participate in a free or reduced price lunch program. Many more black parents reported that their children rode buses than did white parents (85.5% to 58.1%). This result was supported by the student survey which indicated that over 90% of the black respondents rode buses while only 24.3% of the white respondents rode buses.

While the professional personnel, as a group, supported the high school graduation examination, the support was much stronger among the white

professionals. Almost 36% of the black professionals felt that students should <u>not</u> be required to pass such an examination.

Alexander City

<u>Results across constituency groups</u>. Four of the six constituency groups surveyed were asked questions about their preferences for the future goals of the Alexander City Schools and about methods for financing these goals. On most issues, the four groups (parents, professional personnel, community, and community leaders) agreed on the most important goals and on the financing of these goals. This section summarizes the top one or two goals for each area surveyed.

Eighteen possible goals relating to the physical plant of the schools were offered for consideration. The goal given top priority by a majority of the respondents was the removal of asbestos from the schools. This was selected as an important goal by the highest proportion of three of the four constituency groups and was rated very high by the fourth.

Of the 12 support service goals considered, standardizing the discipline system was the most frequently selected by all but one constituency group. Again, the fourth constituency group did not rate this goal very highly.

There was much less agreement among the constituency groups regarding personnel goals. While parents rated encouraging continued professional development of teachers as the top priority, professional personnel rated the reduction of the pupil/teacher ratio as number one. The community rated the promotion of better staff communication highest while the community leaders felt that long-range planning was most important.

Of the 21 potential curriculum improvements presented to the respondents, the community, community leaders, and professional personnel felt that increasing the offering of basic skill courses (mathematics, reading, and

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language) was the most important. While a large proportion of the parents (92.2%) did support such curriculum change, a higher proportion of parents placed greater priority on offering computer literacy/technology courses and encouraging visits from technical schools, colleges, and universities to the schools in order to increase students' awareness of further educational opportunities.

All four constituency groups agreed that the highest community relations goal should be educating the public on the financial needs of the schools. This goal was felt to be important by 93.0% of the parents, 98.1% of the professional personnel, 86.4% of the community, and 92.9% of the community leaders. Three of the four groups also agreed that the most desirable method for increasing school revenue would be to sell bonds. The fourth group ranked this second while three of the four groups ranked decreasing the expenditures as the least desirable option.

Results unique to specific groups. Some issues were raised only with one or two constituency groups. The more noteworthy of these results are presented in this section.

A majority (62%) of the high school students felt that more attention should be given to the study of trades, professions, and business. An even higher proportion of the high school students (71.8%) were in favor of the schools offering classes that would help students with their personal lives. A majority of 1981 high school graduates (54.8%) agreed that the schools did not offer enough practical work experience and 62.9% felt that computer assisted instruction should be used more extensively.

Results by sex and race. Males, females, blacks, and whites were broadly represented in each of the constituency group surveys. For the most part, the results were similar for different sex and race groups. This section points out the primary areas of disagreement among these groups.

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Again, the responses of the different gender and racial groups were much more similar than different. In fact, differences between the responses of males and females occurred in only a few cases. A majority of male community leaders favored having a system-wide psychometrist (64.3%) while only 42.9% of the female community leaders supported that action. A higher proportion of female professional personnel (65.4% to 50.0%) supported more staff development.

A higher proportion of black community leaders than white leaders felt that additional vocational classes should be provided. A higher percentage of black leaders also supported elementary guidance counselors and more planning days for teachers. Higher percentages of the black community respondents supported new vocational facilities, a new football stadium, a new junior high school, and more instructional resource personnel.

A much higher proportion of black students reported that they rode buses than did white students (76.0% to 7.9%). A higher proportion of black graduates felt prepared for jobs than did white graduates (64.7% vs. 44.4%). A higher proportion of black graduates felt that more emphasis should be placed on vocational education.

While only minor differences could be found in the responses of males and females on the question of vocational education, a higher proportion of blacks than whites in almost every constituency group supported the improvement of vocational education. This difference was manifested in the answers to numerous questions which related to vocational education and work.

Discussion and Implications

Obviously, the survey method is not the only procedure that could be used to do a needs assessment evaluation. Even when you want to provide for input from many constituency groups, the survey method still is not the only choice.

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This section discusses the advantages and disadvantages of this choice based on observations of the two studies reported in this paper.

The survey method was selected over its alternative, in this case the public hearing. While the public hearing has the advantages of being much less expensive and time consuming and still providing for input from several constituency groups, it has one major disadvantage. That disadvantage is bias. A public hearing often draws attendance from those who feel they have a major stake in the outcome of the decision. Many times one or the other side of an issue will organize a group of participants in such a hearing to push for a certain outcome. Thus, all sides may not have equitable input. Further, a small but vocal minority may influence the input of others.

The survey method is not without its disadvantages. To implement a survey of needs with multiple constituency groups requires much more time (usually a minimum of 4 to 6 months) and costs considerably more than would a public hearing. However, much more information can be provided through such a study. Not only can input from many diverse groups be gained, but the differences in their input can be assessed and used to ensure all aspects of the population have fair input. It also allows the surveyer to target certain questions to special populations. For example, in the studies reported in this paper, revenue issues could be targeted for the community, community leaders, and parents while the efficiency of the school bus operation could be targeted for students and graduates.

The results presented in this paper are based on the responses of the people in the constituency groups for one point in time to the specific questions asked. People's perceptions change over time, and they might have responded differently to different questions or questions presented at a different level of specificity. For example, school maintenance was given a middle to low level priority by respondents in the Talladega study. In the

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Alexander City study the question was targeted to a specific aspect of school maintenance, the removal asbestos from school facilities. The priority was resulting from the more specific item was much higher than that for the generic school maintenance item.

The study can be designed to minimize many of these problems through choice of instrument format, sampling, and data collecting procedures. However, results are best used in conjunction with other information for decision making purposes.

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