DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 650   EA 025 091

AUTHOR   Stringer, Bill
TITLE   District Provision: School Improvement from a
                District Curriculum Perspective.
PUB DATE   Jan 91
NOTE   17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
                International Congress for School Effectiveness and
                Improvement (4th, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom,
                January 1991).
PUB TYPE   Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports -
                Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Curriculum Development; *Educational Cooperation;
                Educational Improvement; Effective Schools Research;
                Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries;
                *School Districts
IDENTIFIERS   *Australia (Victoria)

ABSTRACT
                Findings of a study that examined the development of
district cooperation to provide a comprehensive curriculum in
Victoria, Australia, are presented in this paper. Methodology
involved observation and interviews with 34 key participants from
schools in two districts. Participants expressed positive attitudes
toward the district provision process but expressed underlying
concerns. Conclusions are that the district provision process enables
schools to cooperate on curriculum and learning issues, but that
successful collaboration is hindered by too many schools involved in
each district and lack of supportive leadership and time. Districts
can be valuable coordinating structures when they focus on
articulating curriculum programs on a P-12 basis. Finally, if
district provision were the only innovation requiring implementation,
optimism could be warranted. However, overfull political and
educational agendas may hinder schools' maintenance of energy and
will. Six tables are included. (LMI)

DISTRICT PROVISION

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

FROM A DISTRICT CURRICULUM

PERSPECTIVE

BILL STRINGER

Senior Lecturer
School of Education
University of Melbourne
Parkville, Victoria, 3052
AUSTRALIA

2·

DISTRICT PROVISION
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FROM A DISTRICT CURRICULUM PERSPECTIVE

THE ISSUES

Much of the analysis of the factors of school effectiveness and improvement is based on what happens in individual sc'.ools. If the level of analysis moves to district levels do changes in our understanding of the factors occur? Ackerman et al. suggest that a local education system of schools is something more than an aggregate of individual schools. "The move from school aggregates to system may require us to conceptualize educational effectiveness in a significantly different way" (1989, p. 345). Ackerman's conceptualization suggests that the diferences are involved in a way a school exists for its students, while a local system exists for its town and district. I would argue that this distinction is not necessary and that a district can have a student focus, albeit on a larger scale than a school, and that such a focus is important given several features of students' lives in schools. Whether such a district focus is feasible or practicable will be examined in this paper.

In several significant ways individual schools don't exist for each student's learning as such but only for part of a student's formal education. In a system, for example, involving primary and secondary schools one school has responsibility for only part of each student's schooling and there has been little examination of the extent to which one school's learning relates to another's. With this perspective, analysing notions of effectiveness and improvement in terms of student's schooling would seem to require that a systemic perspective is taken so that the analysis of whether schooling is effective is done on a P-12 basis. In this sense a district perspective which can encompass the whole of a student's schooling is, at least in theory, important.

Can the issues of School Improvement and School Effectiveness, largely developed from analyses of single school systems or single schools, be applied to a district, consisting of schools at different levels? Are these issues helpful in understanding how schools in a district can improve the learning of their students?

This exploratory study is based on the move in Victoria (Australia) to a district focus on the provision of curriculum for examining whether schools are helping students to the best of their ability. The conclusions are tentative as the development of districts is still in a beginning stage and their institutionalization is still very problematic, except at a bureaucratic level. This paper will outline what could happen, what has happened and evaluate the potential for future development of districts as educationally important features in improving schools and making their programs more effective.

Clark et al, in attempting to examine the apparent differences between the lists of features of effective schools, e.g. Hathaway, 1983, and the more problematic results fro-n School Improvement research, e.g. Van Velzen et al., 1985, pp. 154ff, have analysed these two traditions within four propositions (Clark et al., 1984, p. 41). This analysis has been used to identify the differences between, and the similarities in, the two traditions and has proved valuable in establishing a structure for this study - see Table 1.

Table 1 - PROPOSITIONS FOR SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT
(developed from Clark et al., 1984, pp.50,59)

SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS	SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

PROPOSITION ONE - Schools matter and can improve

Schools differ in effectiveness; thus they matter to all children, especially to those with fewer learning opportunities outside schools.	Schools, classrooms and systems can improve and the factors facilitating improvement are available to all.

PROPOSITION TWO - People matter most

People matter most in schools (a) teachers affect student learning by their expectations for student learning and for their own teaching performance; (b) students affect one another by their level of achievement, behavioural standards, & expectations; c) school leaders make a difference by setting a climate and supporting the work of teachers; (d) system administrators affect school leaders they provide psychological support, resources and facilitation help, develop a consensus around the rationale for district.	People matter most in school improvement (a) teachers will implement new ideas given active leaders, chance for planning implementation, appropriate training, interaction, space to try & fail continuous assistance & support; (b) school leaders make difference by creating a climate of expecting teachers will improve & giving coordination, communication & support; (c) system administrators affect SI by showing active support in expecting success, by giving psychological & material support; (d) external support helps by giving practical & concrete assistance in implementation.

PROPOSITION THREE - What makes it work

Schools that matter have these features - they (1) focus on students' academic achievement; (2) maintain high expectations for student's achievement; (3) give and use academic learning time efficiently and effectively; (4) maintain an orderly & supportive climate; (5) provide learning opportunities for teachers; (6) use regular evaluation & feedback programs.	Innovations that have been adopted and implemented are perceived as having relative advantage, compatibility, simplicity &legitimacy; Implementation is more effective when the innovation focusses on a specific need and demonstrates clarity in purpose and techniques.

PROPOSITION FOUR - People and Resources make the difference

Why effective schools exist or fail is unclear. The key lies in the people in them and their interaction between each other in them.	Specific resources are necessary to support SI - (a) staff dvlpt. that is task specific and provides continuous & ongoing assistance & support; (b) adequate finance for people, materials, time.

Comparing the four propositions in this way identifies a number of similarities and complementarities between the two traditions and suggests that in the end result, in both traditions, it is people, they way they interact, and the expectations and support they provide that make the difference in the way both traditions suggest that schools can be successful.

However, the one feature missing from this analysis is the one thing which most people think schools are for - what students learn. In one sense School Effectiveness and School Improvement are educationally amoral. Their analysis seems to say that it doesn't matter what students learn so long as their teachers teach it effectively or implement new ideas successfully. I realise that this statement is unfair in many ways, but it does point to the need for analysis of the relationship between these two traditions and the content of schooling. The moves by governments in English-speaking countries over the last decade - England, New South Wales (in Australia), most U.S. states - to determine by legislation what students must learn at school is

really saying that if schools are to be effective or to improve then students need to learn these things. Whereas researchers in these two traditions are focussing on some characteristics of schools and the people in them, political leaders tend to focus more on the content when they are discussing whether schools are effective or improving. Understanding how these two elements, the characteristics of schools and the content of schooling, interact would seem to be important if assisting schools to improve in the present environment is to be successful.

THE CONTEXT

Government schools in Victoria have gained a great deal of independence from central control over the last two decades to the extent now that it is probably fair to describe them as autonomous except in the areas of staffing, finance and buildings. In terms of policy and program development they have a great deal of autonomy unless something goes wrong or parental complaints about policy lead to some central investigation. There are no inspectors to ascertain whether schools are following policies, or external assessment, except at years 11 and 12, and thus schools are free to control themselves unless complaints are made.

Within government schools in Victoria the focus on examining the effectiveness of schooling has clearly shifted, at least in emphasis, to one of provision. Government policy since the mid-1980's has emphasised two words - ACCESS and SUCCESS. The prevailing focus is on access. In 1987-8 the Victorian Ministry of Education released its Curriculum Framework as the framework for P-10 schooling. Nine Areas of Learning were identified as the areas which schools had to use as the framework within which they had to conceptualize and plan their curriculum. This did not dictate uniformity of program but of the principles underlying the program. At basically the same time the years of post-compulsory schooling (years 11-12) were being re-developed, the result of which were fourteen Fields of Study of the Victorian Certificate of Education (V.C.E.). These were more controlled under a complex mix of external moderation of assessment and central detail of courses of study. See Table 2 (p. 4) for the details of Curriculum Frameworks and V.C.E. In terms of this study the Ministry's focus has been on whether the schools across P-12 can provide access to all these studies for all students. Can the schools provide all these studies, or to use the Ministry language, can they provide the comprehensive curriculum for all students?

Table 2: LINKS BETWEEN CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS AND THE
V.C.E. AREAS OF LEARNING

CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS P-10 ("Areas of Learning")	VICTORIAN CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION 11-12 ("Fields of Study")
The Arts	The Arts
Commerce	Business Studies Information Technology
English	English Language
Languages Other Than English	Languages Other Than English
Mathematics	Mathematics
Personal Development	Human Development
Science	Science
Social Education	Social Education Australian Studies Earth Studies History
Technology Studies	Technological Studies

(from The Frameworks Support Kit, Ministry of Education (Schools Division), Victoria, 1988, p. 2.4/6)

Thus the context of provision has been a policy of comprehensiveness. Since the beginning of this century students in the government system who have gone beyond grade 6 have had to make a choice at the end of that year in the Primary School between proceeding to a High School or to a Technical School. During the 1980's this division has in general been disappearing so that more and more successively students from the end of year 6 will proceed to the local Secondary College. This has meant that for Secondary Colleges to be truly comprehensive they need to ensure that they can provide the full comprehensive program, combining features of both the high and the technical schools together with recent interpretations of student needs for the future, which Curriculum Frameworks was partly intended to identify. The effective school has been defined, at least for the moment, as the school which can provide access to a comprehensive curriculum. From the Ministry's perspective then, the good school is measured by whether the school has the full range of studies it is supposed to have. The implication of this is that both High and Technical schools may need to expand or to amalgamate to achieve the full range expected in the Secondary College - this is called Reorganization.

ESTABLISHING DISTRICTS

Throughout each region in the state each school, Primary and Secondary, has, through a consultative process been placed in a district consisting of eight or so Primary schools and three to seven Secondary schools which are linked through local connections, especially through students moving from Primary schools to Secondary schools. These districts then have the reponsibility of implementing District Provision as the process is called.

Within each district each school has to carry out a Curriculum Audit within the structure provided by Curriculum Frameworks and V.C.E. and through a representative process be involved in Working Parties developing reports detailing the curriculum that is provided within the district and what gaps are left - what aspects of Curriculum Frameworks and V.C.E. are not being offered - see Table 3 (p.6) for the various stages of District Provision.
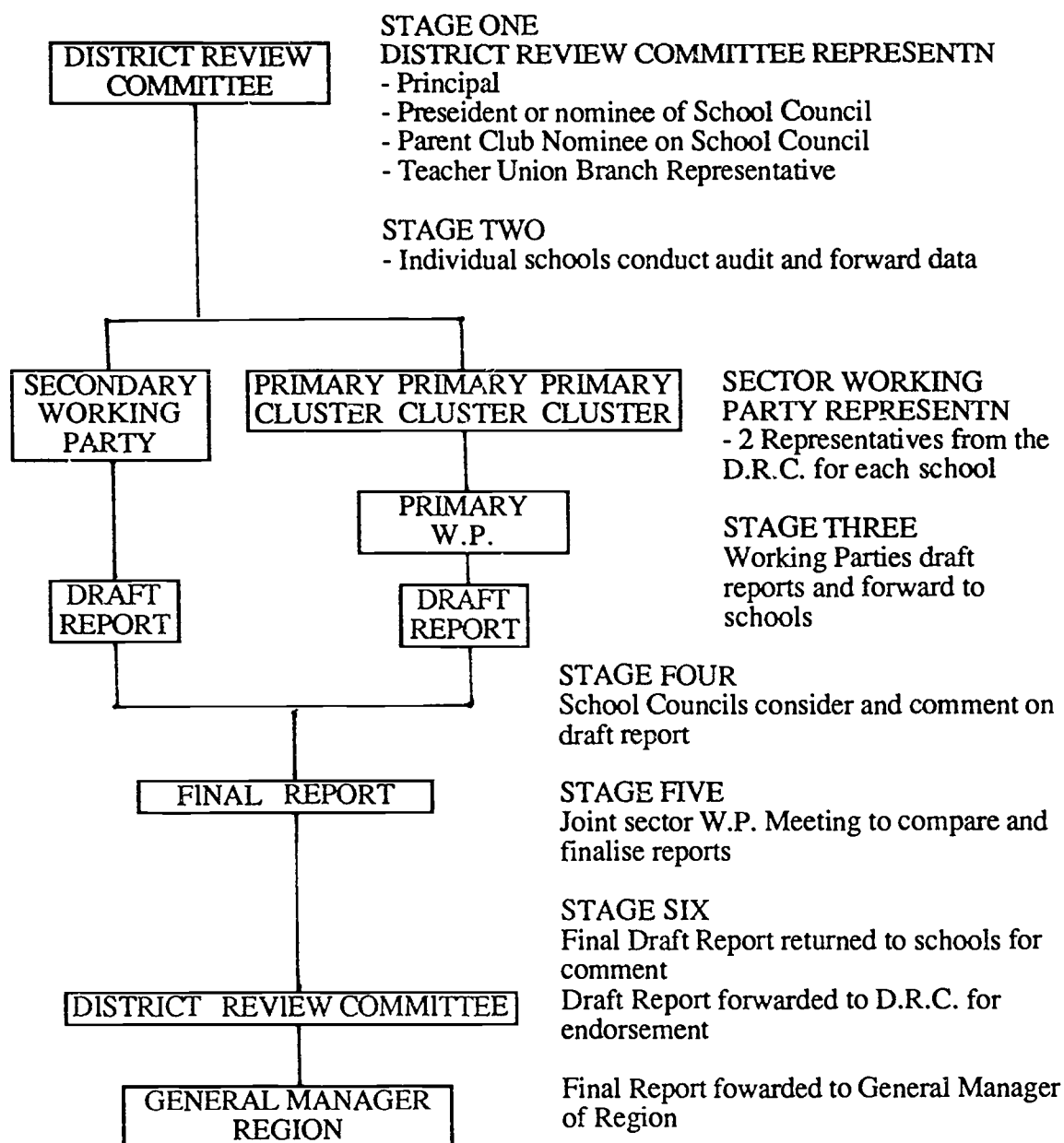
The Ministry has thus established a process in which they have set the rules - Curriculum Frameworks and V.C.E. - and given to the district the responsibility to decide what needs to be implemented to ensure that the rules are followed. The Ministry has thus identified the district as the means by which the system can guarantee to each student that he or she has access to a comprehensive curriculum. It is this identification that provides the particular focus for this study. The district is being seen as a framework within which each school will have to work, thus reducing its autonomy.

The notion of the schools of a district working together closely to ensure that the learning of the students of a district is the most effective would seem to have much going for it:
1. it brings together schools covering the P-12 range to discuss the curriculum they each offer, how it is taught and learnt, and how it can be coordinated for the benefit of the students of the district;
2. it enables the teachers and parents of a district to discuss what pattern of schooling is best for their district. This could lead to reorganisation, closing one or more schools or establishing new patterns (e.g. P-8, 9-12 or P-6, 7-10, 11-12) of schooling.
3. it thus should enable the people of a district to have ownership over much of the features of providing schooling in their area. The evaluation document claimed that "District Provision is a process whereby the schools of a district review the way they provide curriculum to the children of the district in order to ascertain the nature of any improvement and reorganistion needed in that provision. The implication of this is that they are able to control the details of the process and future developments in the district; it is their process, they control it, they own it" (Stringer and Johnson, 1990, p.8).

Table 3 - THE DISTRICT PROVISION PROCESS

REVIEW: COMMITTEES AND REPORTING RELATIONSHIPS

STAGE ONE
DISTRICT REVIEW COMMITTEE REPRESENTN
- Principal
- Preseident or nominee of School Council
- Parent Club Nominee on School Council
- Teacher Union Branch Representative

STAGE TWO
- Individual schools conduct audit and forward data

```
DISTRICT REVIEW
COMMITTEE
        |
        |
  +------------+-----------------+
  |            |                 |
SECONDARY   PRIMARY PRIMARY PRIMARY      SECTOR WORKING
WORKING     CLUSTER CLUSTER CLUSTER      PARTY REPRESENTN
PARTY                |                   - 2 Representatives from the
  |                  |                     D.R.C. for each school
  |              PRIMARY
  |              W.P.
  |                  |
DRAFT            DRAFT
REPORT           REPORT
  |                  |
  +------------------+
           |
      FINAL  REPORT
           |
  DISTRICT  REVIEW COMMITTEE
           |
  GENERAL MANAGER
  REGION
```

SECTOR WORKING
PARTY REPRESENTN
- 2 Representatives from the
D.R.C. for each school

STAGE THREE
Working Parties draft
reports and forward to
schools

STAGE FOUR
School Councils consider and comment on
draft report

STAGE FIVE
Joint sector W.P. Meeting to compare and
finalise reports

STAGE SIX
Final Draft Report returned to schools for
comment
Draft Report forwarded to D.R.C. for
endorsement

Final Report fowarded to General Manager
of Region

But this takes us back to the question posed at the start of this paper - can schools work together in a district to make decisions about the total pattern of schooling and curriculum? When we analyse this question in relation to issues of school effectiveness and improvement as was identified in Table 1, it seems to require that the district work as a mega-school in which -

1. the emphasis is on the students' learning activities and implementing new ideas which lead to more successful learning for students on a P-12 basis. A significant factor in this emphasis is on the high expectations held by teachers and students for achievement in the school;

2. the participants have confidence and trust in the organisation. The understanding of the principles behind organisational health indicates that people are

very willing to be involved in extensive analysis, debate and decision-making so long as they believe that what they are doing means something and is not just being used to justify decisions already made. In other words they believe that they have control within accepted guidelines of the situation, and are not just being manipulated;

3. there is supportive leadership both in the district and from the region to enable the members of the district to behave cooperatively and effectively in decision-making and implementation;

4. resources are provided to enable the process to work and the implementation to be successful.

Is this possible? Does the process of District Provision enable this to happen? Can schools adopt a district view? Can they think past the status quo of their school and take a district view which could lead, for example, to the closure of their school? It is important to note that there is a potential conflict of interests between what is best for the district and what appears to be best for any individual school of the district. The players in the District Provision process are likely to be involved in this potential conflict. Clearly the process of District Provision, as distinct from its results, should enable this conflict to be resolved by developing a district-wide cooperative spirit. In this sense, District Provision should not be a short term event but the beginning, or continuation, of a process of cooperative endeavour between the schools which should continue to pervade the operations of the schools of the district.

THE RESULTS OF DISTRICT PROVISION

Whether District Provision is effective in achieving this can only be answered in the future as districts in Victoria have only been in place for just over six months. So the evidence presented and analysed here can only be seen as exploratory. Whether it leads to more effective learning will need to wait for more longitudinal data to be collected. The purpose of this as an exploratory study is thus to identify what has appeared to be successful and what needs to be monitored carefully as districts and their cooperative processes do or don't develop.

The data that is available has been collected through examining the perceptions from participants in the process and the observation of two evaluators in two districts, and limited observations and discussions from other districts in Victoria.

In the formal evaluation the two key participants from each school in the two districts were asked at the end of stage 5 (see Table 3) what concerns they had about District Provision. Hall, George and Rutherford (1979) found that attending to concerns was a highly effective way to understand better the perceptions of persons engaged in new experiences. They developed a means of interpreting the data which was most relevant to the questions about the effectiveness of District Provision in that it focusses on how people change and develop in their concerns during their experience of a process. The value of their technique is that the results provide evidence about the degree to which the participants have moved from information and personal concerns to more collaborative and refocussing concerns. Thus it was argued in this study that the extent to which participants had moved from seeing District Provision in personal terms to seeing it in collaborative terms provided evidence of whether they can take a district view. Statements were collected from each participant and classified according to the seven stages which Hall et al had developed:

8

Table 4 - STAGES OF CONCERN IN DISTRICT PROVISION
(developed from Hall et al., 1979)

0   Awareness: Little knowledge of the District Provision process is indicated.
1   Informational: A general awareness of the District Provision process and interest in learning more about it is indicated.
2   Personal: Uncertainty about roles played by the individual and the demands placed on him/her by the District Provision process is reflected.
3   Management: Attention is on the details and tasks of the District Provision demands.
4   Consequence: Impact of the District Provision process on stakeholders is reflected.
5   Collaboration: The focus is on co-ordination and co-operation with others in relation to the District Provision process and its use.
6   Refocussing: Signifies the presence of definite ideas about major changes, or alternatives to, the existing form of the process.

Each participant's concern was analysed according to these seven stages and the results are shown in Table 5

Table 5 : NUMBERS OF PARTICIPANTS AT EACH STAGE OF CONCERN

Stage of Concern	District 1	District 2
0 - Awareness	0	0
1 - Information	0	0
2 - Personal	0	0
3 - Management	2	4
4 - Consequence	8	12
5 - Collaboration	3	5
6 - Refocussing	0	0
TOTALS	13	21

It is clear from Table 5 that, at the time of collecting the data, participant concerns were focussed on "management", "consequence" and "collaboration." This result suggests that the participants are tending to take a district view and that the process appears to be effective. These examples of the statements of concern were particularly pertinent to this study by providing more substance as to the nature of the concerns.

Management Concerns:

"The time and resources input to date has not been effectively utilized. To date we have not achieved a determined outcome. The procedure provides a consultative process however the issues are too large to give due deliberation and considered answers."

"The constant guessing - game of assumptions, pressures, etc and the overall very dubious political - educational basis of many of the set 'rules'."

"Is anything happening or is it a ploy to make it look like something is happening? Is it all another burden or something of benefit?"

"Where will the money come from to provide a comprehensive curriculum?"

"How can we provide this very large comprehensive curriculum in primary schools with a lack of funding and trained staff? Will the Ministry become dictatorial in forcing schools to teach subjects and large grades?

Consequence Concerns:

"That all children have access to a full curriculum on an equal basis. Full use of resources available be used."

"The quality of education is maintained for all children within the district ie they have access to all areas in Frameworks and that the children at V.C.E. levels all have access to all possible subjects within the district."

"The need to provide an education system that provides a comprehensive program capable of satisfying the expectations of all students in the district, irrespective of whether they aspire to Tertiary Education or other areas."

"Will we get to a decision which in fact provides a district comprehensive curriculum. That will strengthen and expand support / attendance in The State System."

"There are many areas of concern to schools that have cropped up, and should be addressed even though they are not strictly curriculum matters: e.g. transition, rationalisation of secondary schools, provision of adequate resources for appropriate programs for schools in the 1990's."

"The lack of communication between primary and secondary school teachers."

"The inability of the district to provide a totally comprehensive curriculum given the number of secondary schools."

"Can we get on with reorganisation? - so many benefits - viable district which can offer consistent P-12 and rationalise VCE offerings, avoid duplication, look after students/staff/community, develop good local PR , resource transition, recieve help and support from region and support centre staff."

"That, in the name of broadening curriculum for students, theoretically a desirable objective, schools and teachers will be so wrenched and demoralised that the final product will have students and teachers worseoff than before the process."

"That when primary students enter secondary they are able to continue the progress begun in LOTE, music, computers, maths, language, etc in such a way that suits their needs."

Collaboration Concerns:

"That the process may not work as intended; that the Ministry of Education intention of encouraging local participation in co-operatively working out means to provide opportunities for all students to comp. curric. will be frustrated by the obstructive tactics of powerful minority interests."

"The preparedness of schools to consider the issues relating to district concerns/issues and a willingness to attempt to resolve these for the betterment of our student community."

Dist.Prov./Curr.

"The continuity of curriculum through P-10. This raises many issues primarily those concerning the fact that primarys and secondarys don't work together and have different philosophies regarding their teaching practices."

"The welfare of the students, their sense of community, commitment, and loyalty to their school and wider community. This is necessary for development of a sense of responsibility to selves and others."

"Continuation of meaningful discussion to consider district needs."

What conclusions can be drawn from this evidence?

1. As noted previously the results of this investigation indicate that while a number of the participants are still concerned with issues of management the majority have moved to being more concerned with issues of consequence and some have moved to collaboration. This does not mean that the majority of participants see District Provision as being completely positive but that they are more concerned with its effect on the schools and students of the district from an educational perspective than on themselves personally. This result is encouraging in that the participants are moving from seeing their consideration of the issues in terms which are defensive to considering what is best for education. This would suggest that they are confident that the process of debate and decision-making is worthwhile and encouraging them to think openly in handling the issues for the benefit of the District's provision of schooling for all students - this promises much for a collaborative and co-operative process into the future. Whether they are all prepared to adopt a fully district-view at the expense of their school is not fully clear.

2. The distrust, referred to above, is indicated by a number of the concerns, especially at the management level, and tempers optimism about the process (see the examples on p. 9).

3. Moreover, this positive result needs to be put into the total context. The participants who took part in this exercise were those who had been most deeply involved in the process and were thus most likely to have been affected by it. It is the whole community of each school - teachers, students and parents - who will need to develop these attitudes if the process is to be successful in the terms identified above. Unless the majority involved in each school develop in this way then the process is likely to be unsuccessful. Another warning, however, needs to be identified at this point. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that some participants at District meetings have expressed attitudes supporting the District view, but when they are back in their school the attitudes become more parochial and school-oriented. This suggests that those who are not involved deeply in the process are affecting those who are. It also possible for people to revert in their concerns if their trust and confidence are seen to be misplaced by the failure of leaders to support developments with expectations and resources. Although the signs are positive, if the development towards collaborative attitudes is stopped by failures to provide such support, then it is quite possible for attitudes to revert to management and personal concerns.

The previous data and discussion suggests that the participants' response to the process is ambivalent; generally they feel positive but there is an underlying concern about the process. Further evidence was collected from the Principal of each school involved in the two districts and from one member of staff in more than half of the schools about what they thought that the outcomes up to date were. They were requested to comment specifically on things that had been "successful" and "unsuccessful" about the process from their point of view. Seven major outcomes were identified through a content analysis of the statements. The seven major outcomes were:

Dist.Prov./Curr.

1. The process raised the primary / post-primary continuity issue, enabled the two groups of teachers to know what was happening in each other's schools and "highlighted the differences and the potential of closer cooperation between the two levels". This led to initiatives leading to the formation of working parties linking the two levels of schooling;

2. The process provided the opportunity for schools to examine their curriculum offerings and the offerings of other schools;

3. The process alerted schools to Ministry reliance on community facilities to enable a comprehensive curriculum to be offered;

4. It enabled schools to focus on how they were providing a comprehensive curriculum, it reaffirmed that, in general, most schools were providing a comprehensive curriculum and identified the need for further action;

5. The process was successful in collecting the audit data and identifying the implications.

6. The process provided occasions for schools to get together and talk about their curriculum and other educational issues;

7. The process enabled the reorganisation issue to be identified and to be in the process of development;

When these responses are tabulated the importance of the two first issues to the participants is emphasised.

Table 6 - PERCEIVED OUTCOMES OF THE DISTRICT PROVISION PROCESS

CONCLUSIONS:	District 1	District 2
1. Primary/post-primary continuity was addressed	12	6
2. Schools examined their own and other schools' curriculum	8	14
3. There is a need for Ministry resourcing	6	2
4. Examined the comprehensive curriculum	5	3
5. Data was successfully collected	2	5
6. Schools got together to talk about their curriculum	3	3
7. Reorganisation is being worked on	3	2
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS	13	21

It is important to note that nine of the participants acknowledged that, although they had initially thought that the process was going to be a waste of time, they were now not of that view. A number of comments by participants on the outcomes of the process indicated that they were largely very positive about the process and that this contrasted sharply with comments made at the beginning of the process. Only two felt that the outcomes were unnecessary, one that the process was "a waste of time" and that the primaries and secondaries "were not brought together", the other that the Audit told us "what we already knew". So the results do indicate that to some extent the participants thought that there were positive features of value to schooling coming through the process. These features seem to be -

1. The process brought together staff and parents from both Primary and Secondary schools to consider the curriculum provision for the students of the District. This led to links being established which should lead to more understanding of each other's concerns and approaches.

2. The reports highlighted areas of curriculum available and those not fully covered and informed all schools of the district of the current curriculum situation in each school, given the shortcomings outlined outlined above. The District thus gained an appreciation of the programs available and what needed to be done in the future.

3. The process caused each school to think about its curriculum - its structure and detailed implementation - and to consider whether it was the most appropriate given the challenges of the concepts of comprehensive curriculum as developed in Curriculum Frameworks and the V.C.E.

4. In both Districts the process of school reorganisation of the structure of Secondary schooling is underway as a result of the shortcomings identified in the report. This process, however, is tending to interfere with consideration by the schools of issues of curriculum articulation and continuity. The Secondary agenda - reorganisation - is leading the debate and the continuation of the process.

5. In both Districts, however, the Primary schools have established, or are calling for the establishment of, groups to consider curriculum issues - consistency in styles of teaching and articulation and continuity between subjects and schools. The process has identified the differences in approaches to learning and teaching and to curriculum understanding between Primary and Secondary teachers and schools and these differences need to be understood and linked if students are to get the most benefit from their learning experiences.

Earlier in this paper four major features of what districts should be like were identified:

1. the emphasis is on the students' learning activities and implementing new ideas which lead to more successful learning for students on a P-12 basis. A significant factor in this emphasis is on the high expectations held by teachers and students for achievement in the school;

2. the participants have confidence and trust in the organisation. The understanding of the principles behind organisational health indicates that people are very willing to be involved in extensive analysis, debate and decision-making so long as they believe that what they are doing means something and is not just being used to justify decisions already made. In other words they believe that they have control within accepted guidelines of the situation, and are not just being manipulated;

3. there is supportive leadership both in the district and from the region to enable the members of the district to behave cooperatively and effectively in decision-making and implementing their decisions;

4. resources are provided to enable the process to work and the implementation to be successful.

Whereas participants' concerns and perceptions generally indicate a positive judgement about the possiblity of the district being a useful structure these four features need to be addressed. As these four features are criteria developed from school effectiveness and improvement research it is important that their relevance to a district focus be examined.

To what extent does District Provision focus on students' learning activities and developing high expectations for students? One of the criticisms of the District Provision process was that it focussed on quanitity - what subjects were being taught and how much space did each have in the curriculum - while the curriculum questions should have more to do with quality matters. One Victorian principal, not in these two districts, argued that "measures of curriculum provision which fail to refer to the quality of environment, both inside and outside the classroom are of doubtful merit.... It should go without saying that a host of programs may wear the same label but that is as far as the similarity goes. Content, teaching style, levels of student enthusiasm, effectiveness of learning and so on can vary enormously as to put into question the usefulness of classifying and counting according to subject tag" (Vertigan, n.d.). The Audit, as a formal document, did only produce quantitative data about curriculum offerings. However, the Recommendations which the Working Parties developed on the basis of the quantitative data went beyond the data to voice qualitative concerns. This dimension was picked-up by Primary principals in particular when they commented about curriculum continuity with comments such as:

-"VCE could be a positive force for changing post-primary approaches to instruction."

-"We need to address different ways of teaching."

-"we must do something about the practice of boring Yr. 7s with text-book driven approaches."

-"The stand and deliver approach of post-primary is deadly for students."

-"Bridges must be built between primaries and 7-12. We need to work in creative ways on the primary / post-primary barrier."

It is true that the District Provision process focussed deliberately on quantity, in order to gather data that was strictly comparable. Vertigan's argument is, however, unassailable. Names of subjects on timetables do not give an guarantee of the nature of the learning that occurs in those classrooms. If District Provision did not go further than this then the Ministry policy of access has little meaning for students and parents. If the future developments from the process enable the concerns expressed by the Primary principals above to be addressed and handled then the process would appear to have the potential for creating more successful learning. Clearly identifying effectiveness and improvement only in terms of Areas of Learning is not adequate.

Confidence and trust are features for which the data examined so far are relevant. It appears that the participants are growing in their confidence that the district focus is valuable and worthwhile. However, several caveats have already been identified.

1. A number of participants are still at the stage of identifying problems of management and these doubts will need to be handled if more people are to move to cooperative and collaborative attitudes.

2. The people in schools (staff, students and parents) who have not been part of the process have not been surveyed. It is reasonable to hypothesize that, as these people have not had the opportunity to meet and discuss the issues with people from other schools, their attitudes are likely to be more defensive than those who have and thus much will need to be done to help these people to develop a district view.

3. By appearing to focus on surface characteristics of curriculum (subject names) District Provision has been judged by some to be trivial and unimportant,

especially when they perceive that the agenda of the Ministry is not as open as it claimed.

In this context this process is likely to be one in which the perspectives of the participants is likely to be different from those of the leaders; this situation is complex as the districts have no clear leader (see below). In both districts in this situation the meetings have developed structures for discussion and identification of enabling curriculum continuity across P-12 to occur. There is some evidence that this perspective was not fully identified by the Ministry and Region who have seen reorganization of secondary schooling (7-12) as the key outcome. In District 1 virtually all participants identified curriculum continuity as a major outcome and in District 2 over a third did. Fullan states that "the leader who presupposes what the change should be and acts in ways that preclude others' realities is bound to fail" (1982, p. 82). He goes on to argue "that educational change is a process of coming to grips with the multiple realities of people who are the main participants in implementing change". Particularly for Primary School people in this study their reality is enabling the curriculum they are committed to being articulated into the post-primary schools, and this view is being identified more clearly by people from Secondary Colleges as time goes by. If there are different perspectives between school people and Ministry staff then the fragile confidence and trust that the process has developed so far may disintegrate. Recent experiences in other districts where conclusions of District Provision have been sent back from central office to the district so that "a better answer may be found" have not been helpful in assisting schools to have confidence in the process.

On the other hand the processes which developed during the formal operation of District Provision provide evidence that the participants can be empowered to develop structures leading potentially to more successful learning. The significant difference in table 5 between the two districts (referred to in the above paragraph) identified an important feature. In considering this unusual result the evaluators identified that the group processes used in District 1 had not been used in District 2 and this appeared to lead to this difference. District 1 used small group work prior to the formal meetings to enable the participants to thrash out issues and this led to the establishment of structures for on-going discussion of the issues after the formal District Provision stages had been completed. The evaluators referred to this as developing a game plan "to ensure participant confidence and ownership, the accuracy of information gathered and the achievement of worthwhile outcomes. The game plan thus needs to focus quickly on the key issues and involve participants effectively in analysis and decision-making" (Stringer and Johnson, 1990, p. 22). Confidence and trust can be built through such processes.

The third criterion, that of supportive leadership, is more problematic. The district has no clear leader. There are School Support Centres which tend to have several districts in their sphere of influence, but there is no formal structure by which the Centre's key staff are necessarily seen as the district's leaders although some could play that role. The Region is even more distant, but it is through the Region that resources and significant support flow. Can an educational structure like a district succeed without leadership? Can individual schools supply that leadership or will this put a leader of the district from one individual school in an impossible political situation? Time can only tell in this situation, although resources are a major factor (see below). One possible answer in this situation may be to do with the number of schools in a district. The development of curriculum continuity and strong links between primary and post-primary schools has occurred in other districts where one or two post-primary schools have linked closely with the primary schools whose students normally go on to those post-primary schools (e.g. DeerPark / Albanvale Network, 1989). The schools did not see this activity as limiting their school's mission but expanding it in order to identify their place in the total learning of each child. In these cases working parties in subject areas, on student profiling and general educational

14   15
Dist.Prov./Curr.

policy development have occurred, normally under the leadership of the five or six principals involved. However, the 1989 Annual Report did refer to the need to "deal with the divergent interests and the needs of the school" (op.cit., p. 6), clear reference to the tensions that can develop in such situations. Whether this close cooperation can occur in a district where ten schools or more are involved would appear questionable especially where no leader outside any one school is involved.

In this context, the fourth criterion, Resources, is extremely problematic, especially in the present economic situation. One principal noted that "few mechanisms exist to put recommendations into action", and that "it will ultimately be up to individual schools to take action." Two Primary principals asserted that they were "Pessimistic about post-primary colleagues taking much notice", and that "Little pressure will come from post primaries". Another principal, from the post-primary area, considered that, "we will need 'outsider' support if it is going to work at all." It is hard to be confident that the effort of coordination that will be necessary will occur in the light of these statements. The evaluation document commented that "The consequences of the District Provision process other than School Reorganisation, namely Curriculum Continuity between Primary and Secondary schools and Resourcing of Ministry priority curriculum areas, must be identified and supported by analysis and resources. There is evidence from this evaluation that such developments between schools need to be supported by resources from the Ministry. District Provision, we believe, has in both Districts generated much goodwill between sectors of the educational system and promises much in making significant breakthroughs in developing a truly P-12 approach to curriculum and to learning and teaching in particular. It would be extremely unfortunate if this potential was lost because of the lack of effective resourcing" (Stringer and Johnson, 1990, p. 54).

What then is the conclusion of this study? At this exploratory stage these conclusions are tentative and establish hypotheses to be examined as the process already commenced develops into the future or fails to continue.

1. District Provision identifies a process and a structure that enables schools to cooperate on curriculum and learning issues so that students can learn more effectively and successfully. Carefully constructed collaborative processes to complement the formal process enable participants to contribute valuably to decision-making on issues they have identified.

2. Districts will collaborate more successfully if fewer schools are involved in each district.

3. District Provision can be successful in the outcomes outlined above if psychological and material resources, especially supportive leadership and time, are provided.

4. Districts can be valuable coordinating structures for students' learning when the focus of the districts is on articulating curriculum programs developing effective learning appraoches and strategies on a P-12 basis.

These hypotheses will form the basis for further investigation on the consequences of District Provision. If District Provision were the only major innovation requiring implementation then one could be optimistic, but political and educational agendas already seem overfull. Whether schools can maintain the will and energy needed must be questioned given this overload.

REFERENCES:

Ackerman, W., Flum, H., Gordon, D. and Gorodetsky, M. (1989), "Effective Schools and Effective Local Systems," in Creemers, B., Peters, T. and Reynolds, D.(eds.), *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, Amsterdam, Swets and Zeitlinger.

Clark, D.L., Lotto, L.S. and Astuto, T.A. (1984), "Effective Schools and School Improvement: A Comparative Analysis of Two Lines of Inquiry", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 3, (Summer, 1984), pp. 41-68.

Deer Park / Albanvale Network (1989), *School Community Development Network,*1989 Annual Report, mimeo.

Fullan, M. (1982), *The Meaning of Educational Change*, Toronto, OISE Press.

Hall, G.E., George, A.A. and Rutherford, W.L. (1979), *Measuring stages of concernabout the innovation: A manual for use of the SoC Questionnaire* (2nd Edition), Austin, Texas, University of Texas.

Hathaway, W. (1983), *Effective Teachers in Effective Schools*, paper presented at the A.E.R.A. Conference.

Stringer, B. and Johnson, N. (1990), *Evaluation Report - District Provision Process - Districts B3 and D2 Eastern Metropolitan Region* (Victoria), mimeo.

Van Velzen, W.G., Miles, M.B., Ekholm, M., Hameyer, U., and Robin, D. (eds.) (1985), *Making School Improvement Work*, Leuven/Amersfoort, O.E.C.D., ACCO.

17