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How US States Are Reforming Public Education

—Lynn Grover Gisi

AMERICANS will long remember the early 1980s as years of major reform in their public schools. Nearly every state has initiated a comprehensive plan for improving education, from kindergarten through grade 12. More than 250 state task-forces are studying selected education issues in the hope of laying a solid foundation for education reform.

Some common concerns across the country are integrating technology into the curriculum, strengthening high school graduation requirements, raising teacher standards, and developing new ways to finance excellence in education.

For a variety of reasons, governors, legislators, and chief state school officers are fueling the current reforms. Of course, states have always been constitutionally responsible for education, but recently, "education governors" are using the influence of their offices to promote needed actions in education.

These state leaders are not acting alone, however. Parents, teachers, local boards of education, and business leaders are making their wishes known through public hearings and commission appointments. While businesses have made it clear that they have no intention of running the schools, they recognize the importance of their investment in quality education. Although this second group of actors may not receive the same public recognition or media attention as do the state leaders, they are equally important because they must support the tax increases which make reform possible. They don't want to pay more for the same product they have received in the past, but public willingness for new taxes linked to education renewal is strong.

The Education Commission of the States published a report, "Action in the State," which highlights many state reforms in elementary and secondary education. The reforms encompass new standards for students and schools, the teaching profession, new resources for education, leadership and management, and special student populations.

NEW STANDARDS FOR STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS. To ensure a quality product for new investments, states continue to demand higher standards of accountability for students and schools. Today, almost every state has a student testing programme (over 70 different tests are used across the states). This trend

originated with the 1970s basic skills movement, whereby students were required to demonstrate that they had mastered a minimum set of skills. The testing results helped identify weaknesses in the curriculum. What is different about today's approach to testing is that states are increasingly tying individual test results to high school graduation and grade promotion, with required remedial programmes for students who do not meet passing standards.

For example, the Arizona State Board of Education has identified specific skills to be attained in all required subjects for promotion from eighth grade and graduation from 12th grade. The board is considering a grade-three "checkpoint." Effective in 1985, Maryland students were required to pass four minimum competency tests for graduation.

Almost every state has raised its high school graduation requirements in terms of the number of courses required for graduation. Local boards have also raised requirements in the 13 states where graduation standards are determined by school districts. Most often, states and districts have raised requirements for mathematics, science, foreign languages, English and language arts, social sciences, and computer education. Florida currently has the stiffest high school graduation requirements in the United States.

Almost 40 states initiated curriculum reforms between 1982 and 1985, including new laboratory equipment, model curricula, strengthened compu-

ter education programmes, revised textbook policies, and increased requirements for course content. The Utah State Board of Education resolved to emphasize high-level thinking skills—such as critical reading and independent thinking—in all education curricula.

The Illinois State Board will replace current programme-related, time-allotment mandates with statements for student learning. These outcome statements broadly define the least students should learn and be able to do as a result of their schooling. Each school district is required to develop board-approved objectives consistent with the outcome statements and to monitor and assess student achievement. Schools are required to report student progress to the public and to develop remediation plans for low-achievement areas.

The amount of time students actually spend studying academics is another concern, but most states are opting to use better the time students are currently in school, rather than adding more. Common responses to ensuring that students are receiving the maximum benefit of time spent in school are to reduce classroom interruptions, stiffen extracurricular policies, allow fewer emergency days, and reduce class sizes. Because lengthening the school day of school year is cost prohibitive for most states, small-scale, pilot projects are under way in some school districts.

THE TEACHING PROFESSION. Accompanying new standards for

schools and students are stricter requirements for public school teachers. More than half of the states have implemented since 1984 tougher certification and recertification requirements, regular teacher evaluations, internships for teachers, or new standards for teacher education programmes.

Nebraska's Comprehensive Education Bill of 1984 made sweeping changes in the teacher certification process. Prior to entry into teacher training, individuals have to pass a basic skills test; prior to certification, teacher candidates must pass subject-matter test. All new teachers receive a nonrenewable apprentice certificate and are required to take part in an entry-year assistance programme.

While these and similar reforms in other states will do much to improve the credibility of teachers, they will do little to attract new teachers or retain those already in the profession. Consequently, most states either have already enacted or are considering measures to encourage individuals to enter teaching and to retain the best teachers.

Roughly 30 states offer financial incentives, such as loans or scholarships, to individuals wishing to enter fields where teacher shortages already exist. Since 1981, roughly 20 states have stepped up their programmes to recognize and reward outstanding teachers—by providing cash awards or mini-grants to teachers, or by encouraging schools to develop recognition programmes. (To be continued)