

Prepared by:  
Planning and Research  
Manitoba Education  
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A Commentary  
on Reviews  
of Secondary  
Education  
#86-04

### SUMMARY

This report provides a commentary on a number of studies regarding secondary education. The intention of the commentary is to provide insights and directions that could be useful in the development of a review of secondary education.

From studies and reviews which have been conducted elsewhere, a number of trends are obvious:

- Studies tend to be diverse in terms of overall purpose and specific objectives;
- Many arise as a response to public concern. If the underlying purpose is to appease the public, often consensus and compromise are the only results;
- Within studies a wide range of issues are often addressed. Despite the scope, sensitive and important issues may be ignored;
- A variety of approaches have been used, often within a single study or review. The process can easily become unwieldy;
- Recommendations often cover a wide range of issues. However, proposals tend to be either overly detailed, or they are "motherhood statements";
- Recommendations are seldom ranked or prioritized;
- An implementation strategy is often missing. Recommendations stand alone; and,
- Reviews have rarely or never had a significant impact on secondary education. System changes are much less likely to be enacted than are recommendations which "tinker" with the established structure.

The following questions should be carefully considered during the development of a review process:

1. What is the real purpose or impetus behind the examination?
2. What process will be the most effective in developing recommendations?
3. How are proposals or recommendations to be implemented?
4. How are the public to be involved in the process?

Reviews of education on their own do not create change.

## RÉSUMÉ

Ce rapport commente un certain nombre d'études effectuées sur l'éducation au niveau secondaire. Ces explications précisent certains points et proposent des directives qui pourront s'avérer fort utiles dans la revue de l'éducation au secondaire.

Des études et des analyses effectuées ailleurs, on peut retenir ceci:

- La raison d'être et les objectifs particuliers sont en général très divers.
- Beaucoup sont effectuées dans le but de répondre à une préoccupation du public; lorsque la raison d'être est en fait de calmer l'opinion publique, il n'en ressort souvent qu'un consensus ou un compromis.
- On se penche souvent sur beaucoup de questions à l'intérieur même des études, et malgré l'étendue des points soulevés, certains, sensibles et importants, sont ignorés.
- On a déjà utilisé des méthodes de toutes sortes, souvent à l'intérieur d'une même étude ou d'une même revue et on risque facilement de s'enliser en cours de route.
- Les recommandations portent souvent sur trop de questions et les propositions sont soit trop détaillées, soit de toutes évidences.
- Les recommandations sont peu souvent numérotées ou mises en ordre de priorité.
- Bien souvent il n'existe aucune politique de mise en oeuvre et les recommandations semblent suffire par elles-mêmes.
- La portée de toutes ces revues de l'éducation au niveau secondaire est faible, si ce n'est nulle. Il est plus difficile de mettre en place des changements comme tels au système que d'effectuer des simples mises à jour de la structure déjà existante.

On devrait également se poser les questions suivantes au cours du développement du processus de la revue.

1. Quelle est la vraie raison d'être, la motivation profonde, derrière cette analyse?

2. Quelle démarche sera la plus efficace dans la mise au point des recommandations?

3. Comment les propositions ou recommandations vont-elles être mises en oeuvre?

4. Quelle est la part du public dans cette démarche?

Les études et les analyses ne peuvent à elles seules transformer l'éducation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

To assist Manitoba Education in decision-making regarding a high school review, it was felt that a commentary on studies of secondary education would be in order. This commentary was intended to provide insights and directions that could be useful in the development of a review process.

In 1981 the province of Ontario completed a large undertaking concerning future directions for secondary education in Ontario. The Ontario Secondary Education Review Project (SERP) was designed to produce recommendations indicating "the ways and means whereby secondary education can operate in the best interests of students and society in the twenty-first century", (Nedigen, 1981).

More recently, British Columbia completed a study which was intended to examine how British Columbians view their schools and to consider the directions schooling might take in the future (Let's Talk About Schools - Summary and Highlights, 1985).

As well, the province of Alberta has conducted a review of secondary programs which culminated in a direction-setting policy statement.

Re-examining secondary education has been a priority issue in many areas of North America. This report discusses a variety of reviews of secondary education.

## II. AN OVERVIEW

Reviews of secondary education have often been initiated in response to public concern. As such, studies have usually been designed to "examine what schools do, and how and why they do it; examine how policies are actually implemented in secondary schools; or to provide an agenda for school reform", (Sleeter, 1982a). In other words, studies or reviews of secondary education have been broad in scope and diverse in purpose.

### Purpose

With the initiative for many studies and reviews emanating from public concern about education, specific objectives are often difficult to ascertain. There often appears to be general public concern about education, but even key issues are often difficult to identify.

Objectives for the studies have often been very general and all encompassing. In Manitoba, for example, the Core Committee wished to revise "the entire process of secondary education in the province", (Bullock, 1970).

Other studies such as the Kettering report assumed that there was great dissatisfaction concerning the role of the high school on the part of both the public and the teaching profession, (The Reform of Secondary Education, 1973). The Secondary Education Review Project in Ontario and the Alberta review were conducted in response to perceived public concern regarding secondary education. Reviews tend to be broad, as the impetus for reform often springs from a desire to appease public opinion.

The need to reassure the public, and often the teaching profession as well, manifests itself in a desire for consensus. SERP recommendations, for example, were based on the need for consensus or compromise. As Duncan Green stated when referring to the need for compromise: "Our final report may very well be 'Suppose we just take the first ten, and try them on for size'," (Green, 1981). This seems to be a common theme of SERP. This sentiment was reiterated by Mark Holmes when he wrote: "The Report reflects the Ontario I see, incredibly accurately. It will violently offend almost nobody", (Holmes, 1982).

#### Scope

Studies and reviews have also addressed a range of issues related to secondary education. Christine Sleeter in her article "Secondary Education in the 1980's: A Review of the Research" assesses 16 studies of the 1980's which concern secondary education in the United States (Sleeter, 1982 a&b). Of these 16 studies, six investigate the roles of groups in the education system, five examine school climate, five describe discipline, six deal with goal setting, 12 address curriculum and instruction, while eight of them present specific reform proposals.

Within the studies themselves, a wide range of issues have often been addressed. In their report on British comprehensive school reform, Benn and Simon discuss everything from examinations, to new developments in teaching, to guidance and counselling, (Benn and Simon, 1972). SERP addressed issues ranging

from the general (eg. student behavior) to the specific (eg. number of credits required for graduation). However, issues such as separate and private schools, and the actual instructional process were not addressed (Holmes, 1982).

The British Columbia discussion paper states that "by no means do the issues and questions we raise purport to be an exhaustive list of all the issues and questions that may be raised about schools" (Let's Talk About Schools, 1985).

Some specific issues are often absent while others tend to be over-studied. Sleeter (1982b) argues that studies and reviews have ignored issues of the impact of social inequality, school diversity, and pedagogy. Conversely, details such as credit requirements, curriculum and the role of the principal are over-emphasized (Sleeter, 1982b, Passow, 1976).\*

#### Approach

Reports or reviews of secondary education have taken a variety of forms. SERP utilizes four committees drawn from the public, the profession, and students. Submissions were received and all discussion papers were circulated to elicit responses. Recommendations were produced and submitted to the Ministry. Further briefs were then received. Following this, a document was prepared by the Ministry containing 98 final proposals (The Renewal of Secondary Education in Ontario, 1982).

In 1976 the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) conducted a study of the role of secondary education in their province. This study involved surveys of OSSTF members, parents, and students. Educational forums were held; briefs were accepted; and, project teams were set up to tackle special problems, (OSSTF, 1976). The British study by Benn and Simon also used a variety of techniques, (eg. surveys, school visits), but concentrated their focus on information gathered from the schools themselves (Benn and Simon, 1972).

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\*Sleeter and Passow both present good overviews of secondary school studies and reform attempts in the United States. Further information about these publications is detailed in the Appendix.

The Alberta policy statement was the result of a review which was based on information gathered through brochures and questionnaires; briefs and letters from the public; a Gallup poll; an examination of changes elsewhere; forecasts of the future for Alberta and Canada; and, input from a representative group of students.

British Columbia produced a discussion paper, then solicited reaction from the public and education professionals. Reaction was obtained through the use of Gallup Polls, accepting briefs, and holding public meetings.

Conferences have been held on the future of secondary education in both the United States and Canada (New Dimensions for Educating Youth, 1976; and, Connors and Farmer, 1975). These two conferences, held in the mid-70's, were designed to "bring people together" to discuss a variety of educational issues in a broad perspective.

Large scale commissions represent another approach to the issue. The Kettering Commission of the early 1970's in the United States is one such example. Designed to stimulate changes in the high school, a National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education was organized and sponsored by the Charles F. Kettering Foundation through its affiliate the Institute for Development of Educational Activities, Inc. Individuals selected for membership came from a variety of organizations including the National School Boards Association, NASSP, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, and other educational organizations (The Reform of Secondary Education, 1973). Membership on the Manitoba Core Committee was drawn on a similar basis to include representatives of the post-secondary institutions, school trustees, teachers, parents, and so on.

Reviews of secondary education have used a variety of approaches, with some (such as the Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia reviews), incorporating a number of techniques. In addition, many of the approaches have included some attempt to involve the public, as public concern often seems to be a driving factor in the process.

### Membership Characteristics

Although no systematic study of the issue has been conducted in Canada, both Passow (1976) and Sleeter (1982) comment on trends in the membership of study or commission directors. Both note the fact that director membership has been dominated by whites and males. Ethnic minorities especially have been underrepresented, thus leaving suggestions for reform in the hands of those the system traditionally best serves.

### Recommendations

As the studies have addressed a variety of issues, so have the subsequent recommendations. Again they range from the general to the specific; from community involvement, to teacher training, to the number of credits required for graduation, to school and class size, to career education, to corporal punishment, to defining expectations. Many of these issues are found in the recommendations of many diverse secondary school reviews.

The British Columbia study did not provide any specific recommendations, expressing instead the "hope that the public and professional opinions expressed in this report will be seriously considered...begin to draft policy or position papers..." (Let's Talk About Schools - Survey and Highlights. 1985).

However, what may be the most remarkable characteristic of recommendations in reviews is the fact that they usually either deal with specific details or they are "motherhood" statements. The SERP recommendations provide some classic examples of this phenomenon:

"13. That the number of instructional days in a school year be maintained at no fewer than the present minimum requirement of 185 and that this number include no more than 15 days for formal examinations."

to

"16. That the role of the Arts as interpreters of society be given increased emphasis in curriculum guidelines and resource documents."

The Renewal of Secondary  
Education in Ontario, 1982.

Apart from the range of detail involved, recommendations are often listed without any attempt at prioritization. No ranking as to relative importance or to the immediacy of action required is generally given.

Another difficulty is that implementation strategies are rarely attached to recommendations or reform plans. SERP is an example of both these phenomena, although other reports also exhibit the same tendency (eg. New Dimensions for Educating Youth, 1976; The Reform of Secondary Education, 1973).

The Alberta review appears to be somewhat of an exception to this. The policy statement, which resulted from the review, outlines a framework for change in secondary school programs. While this contains some "motherhood" statements it also makes some concrete policy recommendations concerning such items as discouraging ability grouping at the junior high level, describing the certificates/diplomas which will be available, and specifics about the structure and content of secondary programs.

The policy statement is clearly not intended to be the final step. In terms of implementation, the next stage of activity identified is a comprehensive review of current courses and curriculum. Program changes are scheduled to begin in September, 1986. One or two other activities are also outlined along with some mention of when they are estimated to begin. In spite of this positive attention to implementation in a few areas, many issues are raised with no further plans identified. The report only states that "these issues are being addressed and will be part of the overall plans for implementing the new secondary education policy".

However, the real questions here are: Do the recommendations provide direction for the future role of secondary education; and, What has been the real impact of these recommendations?

#### Impact

Studies, commissions, reviews and reports have been addressing the issue of secondary education reform for decades. Common themes in the recommendations tend to reappear (Passow, 1976). The fact that themes, such as "the integration of school and community" and "secondary education in the context of lifelong learning", have been recurring, demonstrates that the related reforms have not yet occurred.

Some American examples clearly illustrate this phenomenon. For instance, years ago the Kettering Commission in the United States strongly recommended a new system of free public education. Each citizen would be entitled to 14 years of tuition free education beyond kindergarten, of which only eight would be compulsory. The remaining six years would be available for use by the person at any stage of his/her life. As we know, this recommendation has never been implemented.

Another example is a recommendation from the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education, (Martin, 1974). It was concerned with integrating the adolescent into society and the adult world. For one, it recommended placing youth in a variety of situations outside the school but concurrent with secondary schooling. Again this has not become a common practice.

Detailed recommendations which "tinker" with the system have more chance of being enacted (eg. SERP's changes in the credit system). Broad system changes rarely or never see implementation.

### III. CONSIDERATIONS

Certainly examination and reappraisal of the education system is a necessary activity. However, this activity should be conducted with a number of questions in mind.

1. What is the purpose of the examination? If there is a desire for system change as opposed to change of detail or regulations, there needs to be a commitment to that change. Altering small details of a system without the broader picture in mind seldom brings the desired results.
2. What is the most appropriate approach to developing recommendations? Large projects, such as SERP and the British Columbia study may be viewed as costly in terms of the results. If one is willing to put in large amounts of time, money, and effort to enact ten minor recommendations or to simply describe people's views, one must question the cost-efficiency of the process.

3. How are proposals or recommendations to be implemented? Reform proposals must be accompanied by a practical implementation policy; one which is feasible from the individual school's point of view. If this does not occur, even the most innovative and practical reforms will not occur.
4. What about public involvement? If public involvement is desired it might be more cost-efficient to develop recommendations first. Recommendations would be developed internally based on what the Minister and her professional staff feel requires change. Then these would be presented to other educational organizations and the public for discussion.

In conclusion, a quote from Harry Passow's review of secondary education reform, seems particularly appropriate:

Although criticisms, reappraisals, and proposals for reform ... are a continuing activity, the education profession and the general citizenry have never faced such a plethora of commission and panel reports as they do presently. Their number alone might be a sufficient basis for immobilizing those individuals who would like to change the high schools.

Secondary Education Reform:  
Retrospect and Prospect, 1976.

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APPENDIX  
ANNOTATIONS

Passow, A. Harry. Secondary Education Reform: Retrospect and Prospect. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1976.

In this publication, as the title suggests, the author examines both the history and future of secondary school reform. He argues that secondary reform has been an issue in America since the turn of the century.

Passow provides a clear review of many studies presenting eleven common themes found in their recommendations. These themes include: the need for structural flexibility in high schools and high school programming; integration of the school and community; high school size; the need for an effective education-work policy; age-segregation of youth which hinders transition to adulthood; and, secondary education in a lifelong continuum.

He concludes by arguing that the need for reform is well-established. What is required is that the challenge for reform be met.

Sleeter, Christine E. "Secondary Education in the 1980's: A Review of the Research," NAASP Bulletin (October and November, 1982).

This review is written in two parts. The first article sets out the objectives and models of 16 studies concerning secondary education. Eight present agendas for reform. All have been conducted in the 1980's. Both national and statewide studies are included. The author relates the discussion of the studies directly to the actual school situation.

Part II is an assessment of the studies. Sleeter uses the assessment to demonstrate the degree to which study findings may be compared. The author deals with trends in reform proposals, membership of study directors, methodology, and numerous other issues.