POLITICAL AND PRACTICAL ISSUES IN IMPROVING SCHOOL BOARDS' USE OF EVALUATION DATA

CSE Technical Report 314

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How do we make data useful for decisionmaking? For eons, it seems, many of us as evaluators have struggled with this question. We as data producers and data lovers see great potential for our efforts in improving educational policymaking and facilitating school improvement. Legislatures too, particularly in California, seem to agree on the power of evaluative information as they mandate school report cards, performance reports, and a full complement of tests. In the face of such optimism about the power of data, we see repeated evidence that the actual impact of our work is quite modest (Alkin, Daillak, & White, 1979; Patton, 1986; Herman, 1987).

Clearly, simply proclaiming the value of our work is an insufficient strategy for assuring that it reaches that potential. In an attempt to design more effective strategies, we at CRESST had a minor insight: let's stop talking to ourselves about the value of our work, let's stop talking about hypothetical impact if people like us were in planning and decisionmaking roles in schools, and let's start talking and better understanding those who actually occupy those crucial roles in schools. We need to get inside the heads of real school decisionmakers and better understand where our data fits into their worlds. We need to design strategies that meet their needs, not our misconceptions about their needs.

With these perspectives in mind, we embarked on interview studies of school board members, superintendents, and school principals. Our questions were relatively simple: what sources of information do these groups really use to judge the quality of their schools, what standards do they use to arrive at their judgments; how do they make sense of and use the formal test data they receive, and what are their preferences for report content and format. In the process of answering these questions, we also developed interest in respondents' basic affect toward and belief in testing.

The research was the result of a unique collaborative project between the UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) and participating district Research and Evaluation directors who conducted interviews with decisionmakers within their local districts. It was a collaboration which had direct benefits for everyone involved. In the process of doing interviews, our colleagues gained visibility within their districts and the opportunity to better understand the needs of those they are supposed to be serving. And we gained key informants who are highly knowledgeable about local context and a very cost-effective data base about information use in a wide range of institutional settings. The nature of these settings and the specific methodology used in the project is described in the sections below, followed by a summary of results for school board members and their implications.

Methodology

The MLES project's multidisciplinary literature review and examination of district reporting practices were the basis for hypotheses about how school board members and school administrators use data in the real world and the variables which are likely to influence such use. These were the basis for the sample design and the interview protocol.

The Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed to examine questions and variables of interest and revised based on field test results. The final version had three parts:

Pre-interview. The pre-interview consisted of an introduction, a statement of purpose, a description of the general content of the interview, an assurance of anonymity, permission to tape the interview, and solicitation of clarifying questions.

Interview. The second part of the protocol contained the interview questions. The questions concerned the sources, criteria and application of information respondents use to assess the quality of education in their schools. Other questions were about respondents' interest in sub-groups test data, preferences for particular formats for test reports and additionally desired information. The final question asked respondents how much they felt test data reflects what is important in schooling. Copies of the questions used are located in Appendix A.

Post-interview. The final section of the protocol consisted of questions for the interviewer (which were completed as soon as possible after the interview). This sheet had five comment areas—key themes, areas of concern, areas of confusion, personal reflections and suggestions for future interviews (see Appendix B).

The Subject Population

Twelve districts were selected for participation in the study to represent a range of socio-economic status levels, diversity with regard to ethnic composition, and a range of district sizes. Within each district, three principals and three board members were to be randomly selected for interviews. This paper focuses on the subsample of 27 board members who participated in the study.

Interview Procedures

Staff from the UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) and directors of district research and evaluation offices were recruited and trained in study procedures. Training included discussion and practice in the use of the interview protocol as well as directions for randomly selecting respondents, and taping, summarizing and returning completed interviews. Interviewers then used the protocol to obtain data.

Each interviewee was first contacted by phone and asked to be involved in the study. Most interviews took approximately a half hour. All the interviews were tape recorded. The interviews were all conducted between May and September, 1989.

Interviewers summarized the results of their interview as soon as possible after each interview. Both the interview summaries and tapes were turned over to the MLES staff. The MLES staff then coded and analyzed the results.

Analysis of the Data

Tape interviews were summarized and a code book was assembled and tested by four coders. Formal coding did not begin until there was one hundred percent agreement on eight test interviews.

This paper presents the results of the study for school board members, based on simple frequencies of responses. Small sample sizes precluded analyses based on contextual variables and likewise limit the generalizability of results.

Results

Who were the School Board Respondents?

The respondents. Interviews were completed with 27 school board members from a total of ten school districts. The obtained sample was fairly evenly distributed between those who were new to their school board roles (less than two years on their boards); those who had an intermediate level of experiences; and those whom we considered veteran school board members (six or more years on the board; see Table 1 in Appendix C).

Their school district context. Based on state definitions, two of the ten districts represented are classified as large city school systems, two as small school districts, and the remaining eight as mid-sized districts.

While the communities served by the districts are varied in SES levels, the majority are characterized on average as mid-level SES, with about one-quarter low SES and a single district serving a high SES community. The communities served are ethnically diverse.

The most recent results of the California Assessment Program give a sense of the achievement context in which our respondents operate. More than 40 percent serve in districts where students score below the state average in reading and in math.

In summary, although the respondents and their districts were mostly from Southern California, we believe they generally represent the typical district in the state. It should be noted, however, that clearly absent from our study are small rural districts.

What Key Information Sources Are Used to Assess School Quality?

Table 2 and Graph 1 (see Appendix C) show the sources of information school board members most frequently mentioned in evaluating the quality of their schools. Note that although almost all respondents mentioned testing as an important source, only about half were familiar enough with testing to be able to name a specific kind of test (e.g., CAP, state assessment, etc.).

The results in Table 2 and Graph 1 show a clear preference by school board members for qualitative, informal sources of information, often gained interpersonally. Consistent with both their often political roles and their positions as community liaisons, they rely heavily on feedback from parents, the community and the media. Such feedback apparently often comes on a "catch as catch-can" basis (e.g., conversations with checkout clerks, interactions during social gatherings, etc.). For example, as one veteran board member put it, "I get a lot of information in the grocery store, on the street, from people who work in the district who would talk to me off the record and away from their job site."

School board members also highly value their own observations of classrooms and schools. Mentioned by almost three-quarters of our respondents, this source also was the most likely of any source mentioned to be considered critically important and heavily weighted in evaluations of school quality:

> The highest priority is going to a school—and checking the environment—the faculty and students and see how they are doing in the classroom.

> In some ways what I've found to be most valuable is the one-on-ones that I have as a board member out in the schools...primarily with students, with

3

teachers, with administrators and observations...It's a real valuable source of information because so often, the information doesn't filter all the way to the board without that link.

You see the kinds of effort the teachers are putting into their classrooms and I think that says a lot. If the classrooms are vibrant, and a lot of activity on the board—I think that's a good indicator that things are happening.

Many school board members, in addition, appear to rely highly on the opinions of professionals in their districts. Almost three-quarters depend on the superintendent or other district administrators for perspectives on school quality. As mentioned later in this paper, many appear highly dependent on the school professionals to summarize and interpret data for them. One board member noted, "As far as numbers, I couldn't tell you whether being in the 60th percentile is okay or not. I have to rely on seasoned administrators, including principals." In contrast, a small, vocal minority is highly skeptical of information and opinions offered by their school district staffs.

Drop-out rates, student grades, and results of special competitions and awards are valued by a sizeable minority of respondents. Relatively few pay attention to other more formal and quantitative information sources (e.g., attendance rates, teacher turnover, results of college entrance exams, formal surveys). It is of interest to note the low frequency of formal survey data, even though surveys were routinely administered in several of the sampled districts.

How Do School Board Members Judge Quality?

Based on test scores. Almost all respondents queried claim that they make determinations of school quality by looking for trends over time (see Table 3). Scores going up indicate that their schools are doing well, while scores going down indicate that there are problems. Said one board member, "If we've gone up, hopefully we've done the right thing. If we've gone down...lots of things could account for this."

Respondents generally seemed to have difficulty, however, in articulating how large a change actually indicated progress in either direction. Even those who were able to articulate specific criterion, however, did so only tentatively, as this veteran's comment indicates: "If we made anywhere from between a 10 to 20 percent jump each year—I think I'd be real happy...that's a guess."

Also common, reported by about three-quarters of board member respondents, is the use of the normative standard of how other schools or districts are performing. Board members check to see whether their students' scores are above, below, or even with similar schools or districts. As one board member put it, "Of course you look at test scores and compare one school with other similar ones to see if you're living up to expectations."

About half the respondents judge quality by looking to see whether students are scoring at or above the national or state average or whether they are "on grade level." This criterion may be less used than the above two because of where students in the sampled districts currently score. Recall that over 40% of respondents serve in districts which score below the state average on CAP. They perhaps achieve a sense of progress and success—and/or can convey such a vision publicly—by looking for improvement and relative accomplishment.

It is of interest to note that few respondents, less than 20%, evaluate the quality of their schools in relation to specific expectations or goals (e.g., students scoring at specific levels; students mastering specific goals). Criterion-referenced

4

interpretations or performance related goals are generally not in board members' vernacular.

Based on personal observations of schools and classrooms. In making judgments about the quality of their schools, board members were about equally divided among those who did and did not claim to be assessing relatively specific aspects of the school setting. Consistent with the interpersonal orientation mentioned earlier, the most commonly observed aspect was school climate, as evidenced by the quality of interactions among and between students and teachers. Also commonly mentioned were teacher morale, teaching methods used in classrooms, and perceived student involvement in classwork (e.g., interest, attention). About one-fifth of the responded also paid some attention in their observations to classroom management and control issues. The flavor and variety of criteria used are evident in these comments:

> I expect to see cooperation between teachers. I expect to see classrooms where students are attentive and are learning. I don't expect to hear a lot of non-school related noise—the playgrounds are well supervised, the lunch shelters are well organized and the kids are under control.

Relatively infrequent were those who claimed to pay attention to physical characteristics—the appearance of teachers, classrooms, or school grounds; the presence of specific instructional resources. Also rare were those who paid attention to the nature or quality of student work products or instructional content (see Table 4 and Graph 2).

How Do School Board Members Make Sense of the Evaluation Reports They Receive?

While a majority of school board members report scrutinizing the reports they receive, an even larger number report seeking help from others to help them understand and interpret the findings. One board member was very frank on this issue: "In a nutshell, I rely a lot on management to help me understand. After all, as a trustee I don't know your job or other testers' jobs out there so I rely on that kind of information and support."

About a half are looking for aberrations as they peruse findings (e.g., data that doesn't conform to general patterns, findings that somehow jump out from the page). Or as one put it, "I look for something that is really out of whack."

About a third are looking to answer specific, although largely idiosyncratic, questions, e.g., how does school x in my region compare to school y? how many students scored above grade level? has the proportion gone up? how did students perform in higher level skills (see Table 5)?

In contrast to principals' use of results, less than a third are specifically looking for areas of strength or weaknesses and only a couple mentioned that results were directly linked to calls for programmatic changes. Board members also were relatively less interested in subgroup performance. While almost two-thirds were interested in breakdowns of results by ethnicity, only about one third volunteered interest in specific results of limited English proficient students, and only about ten percent expressed interest in gender differences or differences by program category (see Table 6).

What Are School Board Members Preferences for Reporting?

Content of Reports. The great majority of school board members had little to add when asked what additional information would be helpful to them. However, a

significant minority, 20 to 25 percent, expressed interest in additional information, including quantitative indicators such as attendance rates and drop-out rates; and better information about school climate (see Table 7).

A slightly larger proportion also were interested in additional analyses that might contribute to their decisionmaking. Over a third wanted analyses that would help them compare the effects of different instructional programs, and about a quarter each wanted analyses that would let them see relationships between performance and student demographics and answer specific policy or practical questions.

Format of Reports. Results regarding format indicate the difficulty of pleasing everyone. While half the respondents preferred graphical displays, about a third each listed tables or narrative as favored modes of communication (see Table 8 and Graph 3).

Whatever the format, however, brevity appears to be the valued characteristic. Among reactions were:

> Well, the first thing that pops into my head is that they are usually boring. I read the executive summary and that makes sense to me, and I suppose that it's just the nature of the beast that a lot of numbers are boring.

> A small, concise report—four or five pages at the most.

Forty percent volunteered their desire for brief executive summaries of findings. However, because only ten percent wanted less technical information, it appears that while board members desire the findings digested for them, many also want to credibility of the full technical data.

Implications and Conclusions

The results of the interviews carry both good news and bad news for those concerned with the use of information and its effects on educational policy and program improvement.

Good news. First, the findings help to allay some of the concerns of those who have reservations about the value of standardized testing and who worry about over-reliance and misuse of test results. The results clearly indicate that for most school board members such worries are misplaced. Most school board members claim to be aware of the imperfections of tests and judge the quality of their schools based on a broad array of information sources. One board member put it this way: "I know our youngsters get a lot more out of school than, than just test scores...so we can't go whole-hog on just test scores. I know that. There's other good stuff out there."

In short, board members' judgments appear to reflect a balance of both qualitative and quantitative data, much of which is experientially based. Consistent with research in knowledge utilization (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979), school board members seem to rely on informal working knowledge over formal information. While most do not appear to over-rely on test data, some do seem to accept unquestioningly any test results.

A second potential source of good news concerns the working relationships between the board members in the study and the education professionals in their respective districts. Board members generally rely on district administrators—the superintendent, the research and evaluation director, school principals—for their information about the quality of schools and trust these individuals to interpret available data. A vocal minority, however, expresses great skepticism and distrust of

their administrators' opinions interpretations. Exemplifying this view was the comment, "I think that numbers can be put together in such a way that people are going to prove a prejudice or an idea that they had." Members of this second group do not believe anything unless they see and process it for themselves.

A third piece of good news which emerges from the findings is that relatively simple changes in reporting strategies could increase the utility of information for board members. For those districts or states who do not already do so, the addition of an executive summary would make evaluation findings easier for board members to digest. "Keep it short" and "keep it simple" are two important dictums. Further, organizing such summaries (and the full reports) around the big questions which board members seek to answer would also be beneficial. The questions include: How are we progressing over time? How do our results compare with similar districts? How do our results compare with the national norm group? What are the implications of reported results for policy (areas of relative strength and weakness, differential performance by group or program).

Differences in board members' report format preferences preclude easy prescriptions. Backing executive summaries with technical data provided in all formats (graphics, tabular, and full narrative) is one possibility for pleasing everyone, although a weighty one. Combining an executive summary with simple, visually clear graphical displays would probably please a majority, assuming that full technical data were provided as an appendix. The tension among differing preferences, however, may be a relatively short term problem as desktop technology becomes even more accessible for all. For the future, technology-based reports could enable everyone to customize reporting to their own preferences for both organization and format without having to wade through endless pages to find an appropriate match.

Bad news. A first note of bad news relates to informed consumerism. While most board members claim not to overemphasize test results, their knowledge and expectations for testing appear less than adequate. Only half of the respondents seemed to be aware that different kinds of tests were given in their district—at a minimum in these districts, the state assessment program and a norm-referenced commercial test. Most appeared to talk in the vernacular of norm-referenced tests, interested in whether students scored at or above grade level or at or above the national average, but almost none seemed to recognize that their goals were unrealistic given the nature of such tests. "If we're at the 50th percentile, being average isn't acceptable to me." Measurement experts know that all students cannot score above the national average, that all students cannot show progress relative to a national average, that scoring "at grade level" does not have a clear task or skill referent; board members do not. If board members are to seriously use test information, they need to be helped to become more critical consumers.

Some believe that education is best guided by a vision of what students should be able to do and accomplish; board members generally do not articulate such a vision or recognize the weaknesses of available norm-referenced test information for evaluating progress toward such a vision. Further, board members' qualitative bases of information are largely idiosyncratic, built on personal views of what constitutes a good educational program, a good school, a good climate, and drawn from relatively happenstance interactions and observations. While such perceptions certainly have face validity, the reliability of their samples are moot. Chance encounters at K-Mart check-out counters may or may not accurately represent the full reality. Further, the construct validity of board members' judgments, particularly those derived from school and classroom observations, could be strengthened. Judgments could benefit from firmer grounding in research-based conceptions of educational quality and in research-based principles of effective schooling and quality instruction. While clearly it is unrealistic to expect board members to be current on the research, it is possible to envision training

opportunities where board members might refine what they look at/for as they observe and evaluate classrooms and schools.

Attention to student performance is a prime candidate for emphasis should such opportunities occur. What are students working on? What is the nature of the tasks they are able to accomplish, the products they result in? Are these tasks and products meaningful, motivating, likely to require higher level thinking, likely to result in long-term learning? Board members as a group give little attention to such issues. Articulating the important elements of a productive school climate, given the attention board members pay to the climate issue, appears another priority.

Is it reasonable to expect school board members to be more informed data users? Is it possible to help them become such users? The answer to both these questions is "probably yes." But in the end, the worst news which emerges from the experience of interviewing is an answer to the question "Will such use make a difference for educational quality?" In talking with board members it seems clear that for most, the impact is likely to be marginal. Test scores and other data make a big initial splash when they appear in the newspaper or are brought to the board. The splash may initiate consideration of the quality of education and how to improve it, but the splash is generally short-lived as a board moves on to the myriad of other matters which come before it. In fact, discussions of agenda items related to educational quality are few and far between; board agendas appear swamped by the reality of approving consultant contracts for school workshops, for renovations, for new facilities and the like; and by the reality of maintaining status and position. In many of the schools and districts we visited, the problems of surviving, of maintaining the bureaucracy, of maintaining one's power, appeared to have displaced the primary goals of education.

The use of data to improve schools assumes a largely rational, educational goals-based system. The technical problems of providing reasonable, useable data are tractable, and the results of our interviews provide some feasible directions for their solutions. Assuring their impact on educational quality, however, will require continuing attention to larger socio-political issues.

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Appendix A

CRESST Multilevel Evaluation Systems Project
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
for School Board Members and School Principals
May 9, 1989

1. "Briefly, how do you know how good a job your school(s) are doing for students?" (List sources of information mentioned, e.g., parent phone calls, newspaper articles/editorials, personal observation of schools, test scores, etc.)

> a. For each source mentioned, probe for how influential that source is in their judgment of their school(s) and why it carries that weight. ("You mentioned a number of sources of information, I'd like to know a little more about how much importance you place in that source and why." How about _____. Would you say it's of overpowering importance, important, or only somewhat important? Why)

> b. If test scores are not initially mentioned, probe: "Do you use any test data?" (If no, probe for why not; if yes, probe for which specific ones are used)

2. I'd like to know a little more about how you use this information to judge your school(s).

> a. For each source mentioned as important above, ask:

> If your schools were doing a good job, what would you expect to see in [the information source]?"

> What in [the information source] signals to you that there is a problem or that some change is needed in your school/ district?

> b. Suppose there's some discrepancy between these various sources of information. For example, suppose you thought your math program was pretty good, but your math test scores are relatively low, what would you do/think?

3. (Show district/school testing report) "There's a lot of information in reports like this and not everyone who reads these reports goes about it in the same way. When you get a report like this, how do you attack it to make some sense out of it? What's the process you go through to find out what you want to know?

> (probe if necessary with questions such as: what's the first thing that gets your attention? ..... And then what...........Is there anything else that particularly draws your attention? What questions are you asking yourself as you review such reports?)

4. When you look at information such as this, are you interested in knowing how different groups of students within the district perform? (e.g., how LEP students perform, how Hispanic, Black, Asian, Caucasians perform, how girls vs. boys perform?)

a. If yes, _which subgroups_ are of most interest to you?

b. If yes, _how_ is this information useful to you?

5.   Let's think a little more about the information that's presented in school/ district testing and evaluation reports.   We're interested in knowing how to do this better.

a. First, about how the information is presented.   Reports like this typically include narrative text, data tables, graphs and the like.   What's the easiest way for you to get information?

Is there some part of this report that is particularly effective?
What makes it effective?

(Probe for format comments, e.g., are there any displays that you find particularly informative?)

b. Second, about what information is presented. Is there additional information about students, schools, or communities that you could like to see included? Or things that are here that you would just as soon see deleted?

6.   Would you say that test scores capture most of what's important in schooling?   [probe for whether it represents most of what's important in students' academic achievement.]

7.   Any other comments or suggestions?

Appendix B

Comment Sheet

1)   Summary of the informant's personal approach to school evaluation.
(Use your own words to describe how you perceive the informant's actions
and attitudes towards school evaluation.)

2)   Topic areas of concern for the informant (burning issues mentioned that
relate or don't relate to the questions asked).

3)   Problems or confusion (the informant's lack of understanding of
specific questions or your confusion about the informant's answer for a
specific question).

4)   Personal reflections on the interview and suggestions for future
interviews.

5)   Emotional tone of interview (your feelings and your perception of the
informant's feelings).

6)   Location:

     Time:

     Environment (physical and social setting):

Appendix C

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          Table 1: Background and Demographics
                 School Board Members
                      n = 27

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  Experience      %  | District      %  | District       %
                     | Size             | SES
  -------------------|------------------|------------------

  Beginning     18.5 | Small      11.1  | Low          25.9

  Intermediate  22.2 | Medium     74.1  | Mid-Level    66.7

  Veteran       33.3 | Large      14.8  | High          7.4

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    Table 2: Sources of Information Used by
               School Board Members
                    n = 27

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          Sources                    %
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    Informal Parent Input          79.9
    Sch/Class Observation          70.3
    Superint/Other Adm Input       69.2
    Informal Stu Input             55.5
    Community Input                55.5

    CAP                            51.8
    Informal Teach Input           48.1
    Norm Reference Tests           44.4
    Newspapers                     42.3
    Principal Input                38.5

    Grades                         33.3
    Dropout Rate                   33.3
    Awards                         25.9
    Discipline                     22.2
    College Prep Exams             22.2

    Proficiency Tests              18.5
    Teacher Turnover               11.5
    Success - Next Level           11.1
    Mobility Rate                  11.1
    Entries - Higher Level         11.1

    Attendance Rate                11.1
    Counselor Input                 7.7
    Formal Parent Input             7.4

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GRAPH 1

Sources of Information

School Board Members
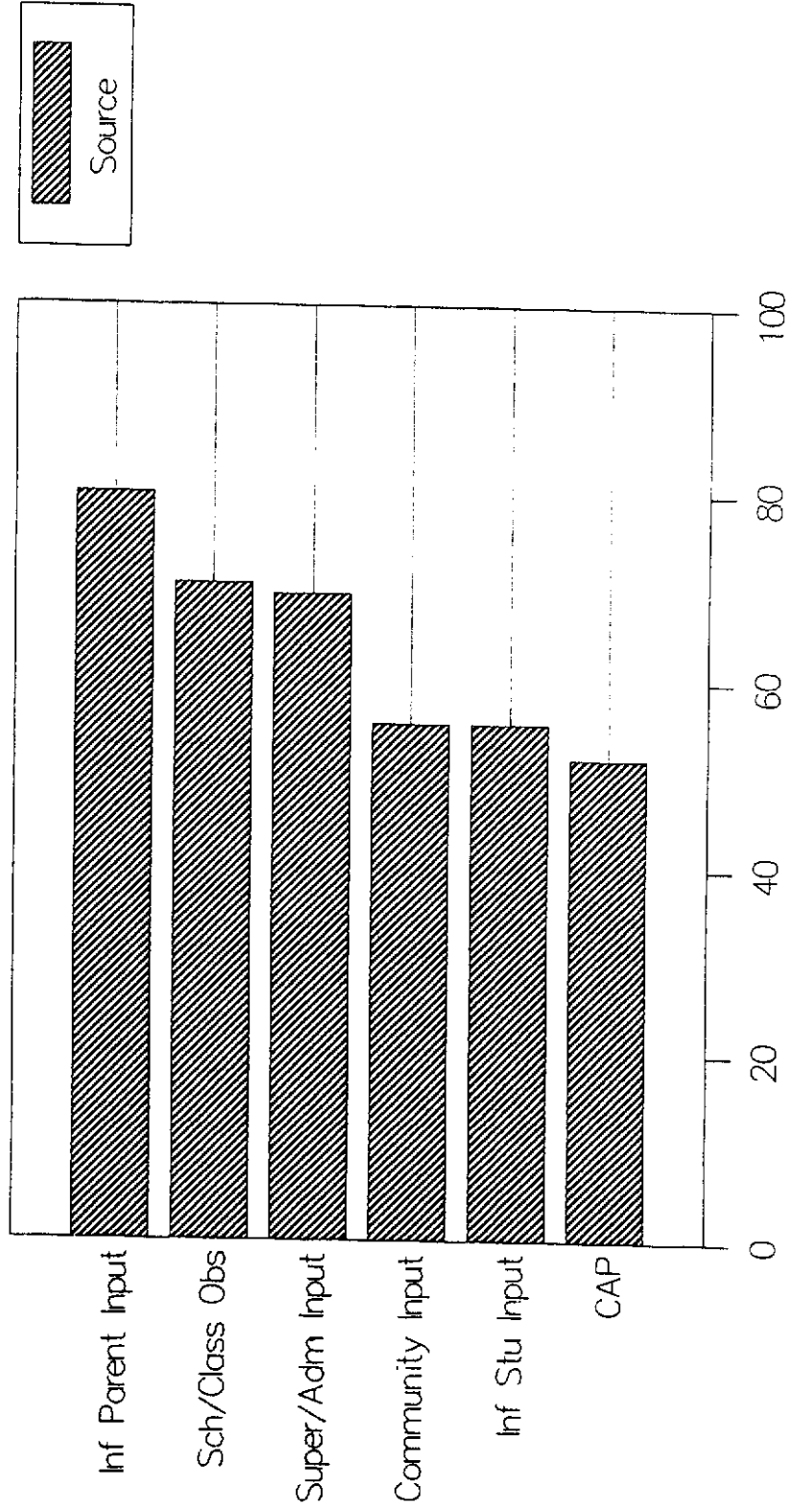
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     Table 3: How School Board Members
              Evaluate Test Scores
                   n = 27

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                                      %
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     Trends Over Time            88.5

     Compare Similar School      73.1

     Grade Equivalency           50.8

     Compare Personal Goals      18.5

     Indiv Student Scores         3.7

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    Table 4: Criteria for Classroom Observations
             School Board Members

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     Criteria                    %
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    School Climate              48.1

    Student Involvement         37.0

    Teacher Morale              29.6

    Teaching Method             29.6

    Class Appearance            22.2

    Class Management            18.5

    Work Product                14.8

    School Appearance           14.8

    Class Resources             11.1

    Instructional Content       11.1

    Teacher Appearance           7.4

    Lesson Plans                 3.7

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GRAPH 2

Criteria for Classroom Observations

School Board Members

Sch Atmosphere				
Student Involv				
Teacher Morale				
Teaching Method				
Class Appear				
Class Managemt				
Work Product				
Sch Appear.				
Class Resources				
Instr. Content				
Teacher Appear				
Lesson Plans				

0   20   40   60   80   100

Criteria
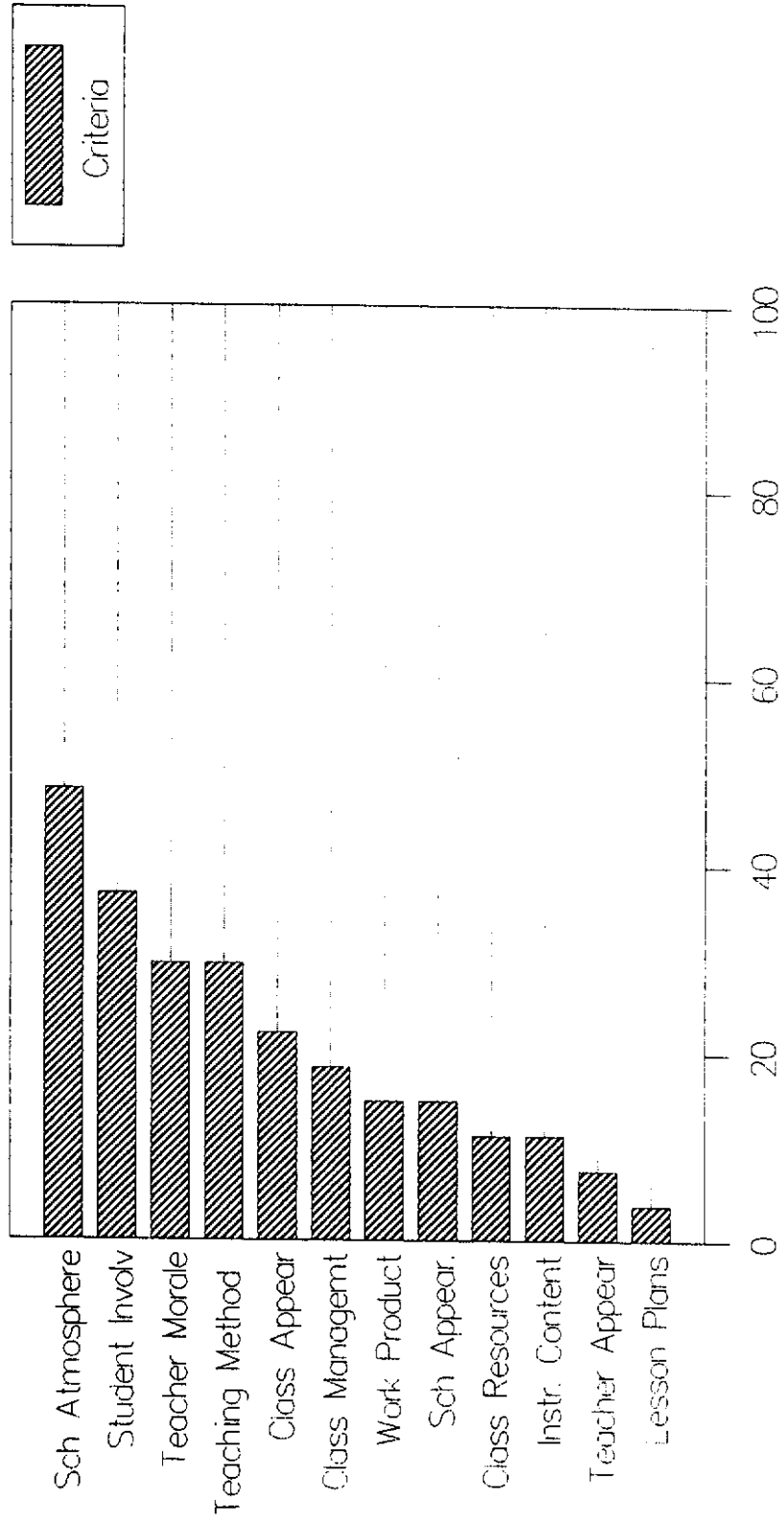
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        Table 5:   How School Board Members
                Make Sense of Test Scores
                         n = 27

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        Activity                           %
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Seek Help                                70.4

Scrutinize Report                        55.6

Look for Abberrations                    48.1

Answer Questions                         33.3

Skim Report                              33.3

Look for Strengths/Weaknesses            29.6

Communicate Results to Others            22.2

Summarizes Report                        18.5

Seeks Instructional Reform                7.4

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   Table 6:  Interest in Sub-Group
             Differences

           School Board Members
                n = 27

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    Interest                      %
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Ethnicity                       59.3

Limited English                 36.0

Social Economic Status          29.6

Stereotype Misuse               14.8

Gender                          11.1

Achievement                      7.4

Other Programs                   7.4

General Interest                 7.4

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Table 7: Additional Information Wanted by Sch Board Members n = 27	
Information	%
Analysis of Test/Programs	33.3
Info on Individual Schools	22.2
Analysis of Test/Demographics	22.2
Analysis for Policy Questions	22.2
Descriptive Info on Test	18.5
Other Quantitative Indicators	18.5
School Climate Information	14.8
Prescriptive Information	7.4

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Table 8:  Preferred Format
         School Board Members
              n = 27
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Format	%
Graphs	48.1
Executive Summary	37.0
Tables	33.3
Narrative	30.8
Better Keys	14.8
Less Technical Info	11.1

GRAPH 3

Preferred Report Format

School Board Members