The School Assessment Survey

A data-based tool focusing directly on the school can identify strengths and weaknesses and can be incorporated into an overall improvement effort.

Bruce L. Wilson

Many modern school effectiveness programs begin with a data collection step (Miles and others, 1983). However, there is a shortage of validated instruments that assess school conditions and also provide useful feedback for staff members. The School Assessment Survey (SAS) is a teacher survey that fills both needs. It measures a variety of school climate and organizational factors related to school effectiveness and improvement. It is also linked to programs that encourage participation in the design and implementation of constructive improvement initiatives.

The Instrument

The School Assessment Survey was developed through four rounds of revision, refinement, and validation. Each round permitted the collection of information from elementary and secondary schools in urban, suburban, and rural settings. A review of the theoretical literature on organizations identified important organizational conditions or *dimensions* related to improvement or effectiveness. Practical concerns were incorporated through conversations with educators and trainers, which broadened the scope of the SAS dimensions and further refined specific questionnaire items related to each dimension.

While most school assessment instruments have been validated at the individual student or teacher level, the SAS has a methodological focus on the school. This fits with the focus in current effective schools programs on the school as the unit of analysis and change. The data offer a constructive picture of the school as a whole. There is well-documented technical evidence of the utility of this approach.[1]

The SAS survey, which takes no more than 30 minutes, is administered in a group setting to all teachers. While teachers are asked to provide their own views, the presentation of results combines all staff members' views within a school to arrive at a school score for each dimension.

The instrument is organized around nine key organizational dimensions (Figure 1). Each dimension has been constructed by combining the results of from five to eight survey items. Not only is there technical evidence of the reliability and validity of the instrument, but comments from users indicate strong face validity. As one practitioner commented: "I have worked here for 14 years, and these are the most accurate data I have seen. These data tell it like it is in our school."

The Profile

The vehicle for feedback is a school profile (see Figure 2), which provides a *snapshot* of the overall organizational condition of a school; several educators have likened it to a human x-ray. The results enable practitioners to quickly identify strengths and weaknesses in their schools. The practical utility of the profile has been enhanced by careful attention to three important questions raised by educators:

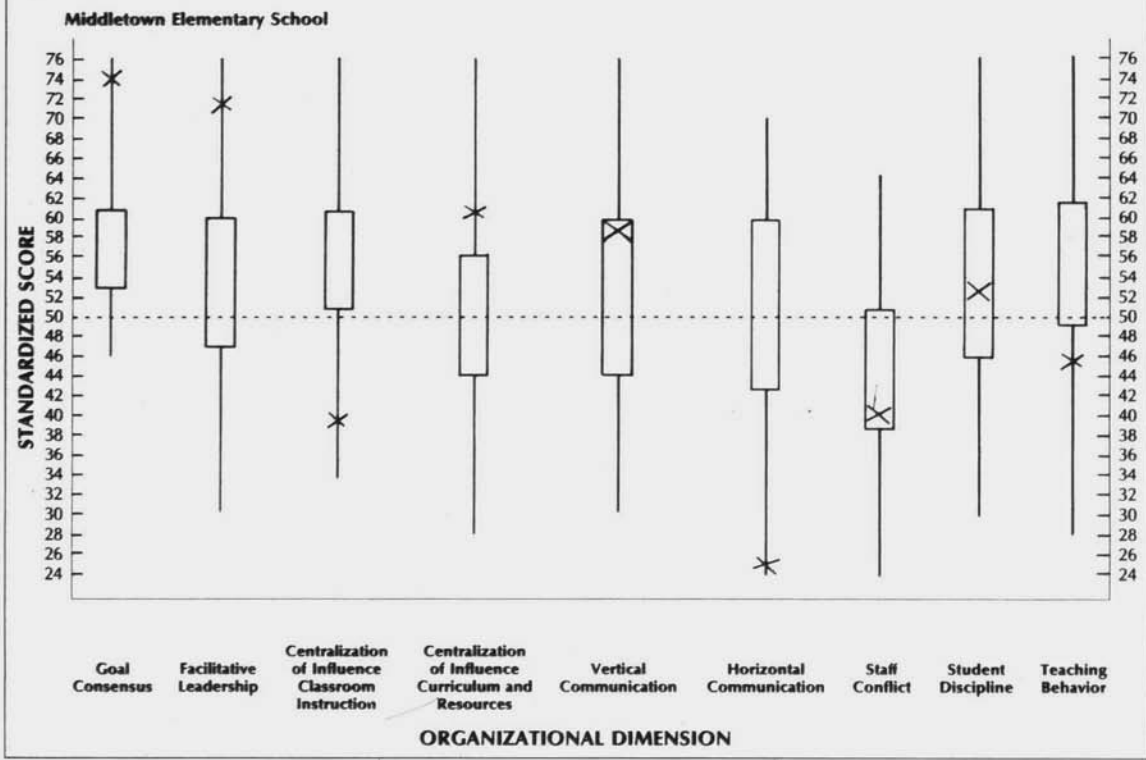
- How can a school determine its relative standing on a dimension in comparison to other schools?
- Is the group of schools with which a school is being compared meaningful?

Bruce L. Wilson is a Senior Research Associate at Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Figure 1. The Nine School Climate Dimensions Measured by the School Assessment Survey (SAS).

SAS DIMENSION	DEFINITION	RESEARCH BASE	
		School Effectiveness	School Improvement
GOAL CONSENSUS	Agreement among teachers on which student skills and characteristics should receive most attention for development.	When staff agree on the importance of basic skills instruction in urban schools achievement increases: • Brookover and others, 1979.	Goal consensus plus the belief that an innovation facilitates meeting valued goals leads to implementation: • Wilson & Corbett, 1983.
FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP	Actions of the principal that encourage and support the professional behavior of the teaching staff.	This measure of principal leadership contributes to student achievement both directly and by working through teaching behavior when controlling for student SES: • Calif. State Dept. of Ed., 1980.	Principal support for an innovation contributes to its implementation: • Berman & McLaughlin, 1977.
CENTRALIZATION OF INFLUENCE: CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION	The ability of the principal to get teachers to carry out his or her wishes with respect to teaching activities.	Strong principal influence that is not dictatorial promotes higher achievement: • Wellisch and others, 1978.	
CENTRALIZATION OF INFLUENCE: CURRICULUM AND RESOURCES	The ability of the principal to get teachers to carry out his or her wishes with respect to courses, schedules, staff assignments, and the allocation of resources.	Strong principal influence that is not dictatorial promotes higher achievement: • Edmonds, 1979.	
VERTICAL COMMUNICATION	The extent to which information about instruction is shared between teachers and administrators.	Frequent communication between teachers and administrators about instruction promotes higher achievement: • Wellisch and others, 1978.	
HORIZONTAL COMMUNICATION	The extent to which information about instruction is shared among teachers.		Frequent communication leads to the spread of change and promotes the effectiveness of instruction: • Little, 1982
STAFF CONFLICT	The frequency of disputes about school-related matters.		Conflict reduces the chances of the implementation and spread of change: • Corbett and others, 1984.
STUDENT DISCIPLINE	The presence of an orderly environment in the school.	A sense of order that is fair, consistent, and encourages responsibility will promote higher achievement: • Rutter and others, 1979.	
TEACHING BEHAVIOR	Actions of teachers that enhance the quality of instruction for all students in their classrooms.	High quality teaching of all children promotes student achievement: • Gross & Herriott, 1965.	

Figure 2. Sample SAS Profile.



● Can a school compare one dimension score with another?

To make possible a normative comparison with other schools, SAS uses a "box and whisker" format to graphically depict the spread of scores (see Figure 2). The vertical lines, or whiskers, extending above and below the rectangular box for each dimension represent the distribution of the top 25 percent and bottom 25 percent in the normed group. The rectangular box in the center represents the distribution of school scores for the central 50 percent. An X somewhere along the box and whisker allows a school to quickly see its score relative to the range for other schools along each dimension.

In the case of Middletown Elementary School in Figure 2, a real strength of the school is the facilitative leadership of the principal, while a clear weakness is the amount of communication among teachers. However, detailed interpretation of these data requires knowledge of the particular school context, knowledge best tapped by involving the full school staff.

The issue of an appropriate comparison is also addressed by the SAS profile. Recent research (Firestone and Herriott, 1982) using the SAS data indicates that elementary schools are organized quite differently from secondary schools. Thus, there is a need for separate profiles for the two types of schools so that meaningful comparisons can be made.

To make dimension scores comparable, all scores have been standardized on a common metric.[2] This capacity to compare dimensions is important because no single dimension can fully capture the climate of a school (Rutter and others, 1979). It is the mix of scores that is so important and which can best be interpreted when the local context is fully understood (Corbett and others, 1984).

Instrument Uses

While the School Assessment Survey can highlight strengths and weaknesses in a school, it is of little long-term benefit unless it can be linked to a well-designed program to help schools focus on a need and work to strengthen the school. An important advantage of SAS is that it has been incorporated as part of development programs that help schools achieve their improvement objectives.

Two such programs are worth mentioning. The first, created by the School District of Philadelphia, uses SAS as an important part of a schoolwide needs assessment package. District facilitators work with representatives from all the groups in a school to identify areas of concern, develop change strategies, and help implement new plans. A similar program designed by Research for Better Schools, a regional educational research and development laboratory, in conjunction with the New Jersey Education Association, focuses on a collaborative, teacher-administrator approach that links school organizational factors and productivity with organizational development strategies to create a successful intervention program. Both pro-

grams place a major emphasis on staff participation in identifying areas for improvement and in carrying out programs to improve the quality of learning.

The programs that use SAS as a data-based improvement effort operate on the premise that schools can improve by making better use of their human resources, by opening up the decision-making process, and by focusing efforts on a few critical areas. By embarking on this process, school personnel have attained improved learning environments, increased academic achievement, higher staff morale, improved relations between teachers and administrators, clearer communication, and greater consensus about their mission.[5]□

To obtain a brochure about the School Assessment Survey, call (215) 574-9300 or write to the SAS Program at Research for Better Schools, 444 N. Third St., Philadelphia, PA 19123.

[1]The specific technical details for SAS can be found in B. L. Wilson, W. A. Firestone, and R. E. Herriott, *The School Assessment Survey: A Technical Manual* (Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, 1984).

[2]The metric chosen was a t-score with a mean of 50 (the dotted horizontal line on the profile in Figure 2) and a standard deviation of 10. While the original metric for each dimension varies, this standardization procedure permits the important comparison across dimensions.

[3]The SAS instrument has been a joint effort of the author, William A. Firestone, and Robert E. Herriott. Funding for this effort has been sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE), United States Department of Education. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the NIE, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

References

Berman, P. E., and McLaughlin, M. W. *Federal Program Supporting Educational Change, Vol. VII: Factors Affecting Implementation and Continuation*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1977.

Brookover, W.; Beady, C.; Flood, P.; Schweitzer, J.; and Wisenbacker, J. *School Social Systems and Student Achievement: Schools Can Make a Difference*. New York: Praeger, 1979.

California State Department of Education. *Report on the Special Studies of Selected ECE Schools with Increasing and Decreasing Reading Scores*. Sacramento: Office of Program Evaluation and Research, 1980.

Corbett, H. D.; Dawson, J. A.; and Firestone, W. A. *School Context and School Change: Implications for Effective Planning*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1984.

Edmonds, R. "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor." *Educational Leadership* 37, 1 (September 1979): 15–23.

Firestone, W. A., and Herriott, R. E. "Prescriptions for Effective Elementary Schools Don't Fit Secondary Schools." *Educational Leadership* 40, 3 (November 1982): 51–53.

Gross, N., and Herriott, R. E. *Staff Leadership in Public Schools*. New York: Wiley, 1965.

Little, J. W. "Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success." *American Educational Research Journal* 19 (1982): 325–340.

Louis, K. S., and Rosenblum, S. *Linking R&D with Schools: Strategies for Knowledge Use and School Improvement*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education, 1981.

Miles, M. B.; Farrar, E.; and Neufeld, B. *Review of Effective Schools Programs, Vol. II: The Extent of Adoption of Effective Schools Programs*. Cambridge, Mass.: Huron Institute, 1983.

Rutter, M.; Maugham, B.; Mortimer, P.; Ouston, J.; and Smith, A. *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Wellisch, J. B.; MacQueen, A. H.; Carriere, R. A.; and Duck, G. A. "School Management and Organization in Successful Schools" (ESAA in-depth study of schools). *Sociology of Education* 51 (1978): 211–227.

Wilson, B. L., and Corbett, H. D. "Organization and Change: The Effects of School Linkages on the Quantity of Implementation." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 19 (1983): 85–104.

Yuck! POETRY!

How many times have you heard that groan when you assign a poem or start a poetry unit? Too many? Do you avoid using poems because of student resistance?

Why DO many students dislike poetry? BECAUSE THEY DON'T KNOW HOW TO READ IT!

PATHWAYS TO POETRY
"Kaleidoscope" (4, 5, 6)
"Mosaics" (7, 8, 9)
"Visions" (10, 11, 12)

• shows students HOW TO READ POEMS in order to grasp thoughts presented in compact language.

• demonstrates how careful word choice and planned arrangement of words and sounds create vivid images and the "music" that make poetry different from prose.

STUDENT-ORIENTED OBJECTIVES show students what they should have gained from working with one of these Readymods.

A PREVIEW enables students to discover what they DO know about poetry so they can skip instruction and practice (as indicated in self-evaluation of responses) and concentrate on learning about other areas in TRY AGAIN! sections.

ACTIVITIES provide reinforcement and follow-up opportunities to view poetry from other perspectives.

A REVIEW — in two parts, one for students of average ability, the other for abler students — parallels the PREVIEW with different poems. Again, specific guidelines help students determine their degree of success.

Each module contains about 80 pages and sells for $9.95 each. CLASS SET of 10 = $79.50; class set of 20 = $149.00. Add shipping (85¢ EACH, $2.60/10; $4.00/20). ORDER FROM:

Multi Media Arts
BOX 14486 AUSTIN TX 78761

Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.