THE IOWA EDUCATION SYSTEM:
DO WE HAVE WHAT WE NEED?
DO WE NEED WHAT WE HAVE?

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by Cindy M. Yelick
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An abstract of a Dissertation by
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Despite multiple school reform efforts in recent years, none has considered the impact of the structure of the Iowa Education governance system on what happens in schools. This qualitative study investigated organizational roles and the relationships between Area Education Agencies, The State Board/State Department of Education, local school boards and their districts, institutions of higher education, and the State Legislature. Knowledgeable informants were also asked for recommendations on how to improve the system.

The findings were organized first by organization and then by entire system. The discussion of these findings interwoven with the literature indicated several factors which impact the system and its future. Iowa highly valued local control yet education was becoming an increasingly important part of state politics. There was a lack of collaboration across the system. No person, or organization, was responsible for the system as a whole. There was no clear answer on how to best redesign the system, but there were clues on where to begin.

Three broad conclusions were drawn. First, the system had developed over decades, but with no real direction for interorganizational collaboration. Second, increased system alignment was valued, but it may not be a solution. Third, a deep belief in local control was juxtaposed with the support of a centrally controlled system. While Iowa's system was working, it was not clear that all pieces of the system were needed as they were currently constructed.
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Chapter 1

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Background

Modern American education has been under constant scrutiny surviving, and at times enduring, recurring waves of philosophical, theoretical and curricular changes since the late 1950's. This period of reform has impacted K-12 education on many levels, from the local classroom to fund distribution at the Federal level. It appears that no stone has been left unturned--from reading instruction to school choice and from national standards to funding formula redesign. Practitioners often discuss the latest trends with skepticism and dread. In lighter times they joke about which is the newest version of new math and how the new math is really the old math in a new binder.

The impact of the pressure to reform is clearly felt throughout Iowa schools, but little discussion is directed at how reform affects the larger system, the system that lies beyond the classroom or schoolhouse level. This is the complex state, regional, and local, governmental and non-governmental system that interacts with schools. This system encompasses many things from practitioner preparation to the interpretation and enactment of
statewide policies. The multiple organizations that comprise the system are in place to support the development and maintenance of good schools in Iowa. All these organizations interact to make up what is broadly referred to as "Iowa Education."

Schools in Iowa are charged not only to "deliver" education but to continually improve the product of that delivery. What does this mean for the Iowa educational system which surrounds and supports the K-12 schools and classrooms? While it is clear that the needs of the learners are constantly changing, it is less apparent how the agencies designed to support K-12 education have changed. Even more, if in fact change does occur in one of the organizations, how, if at all, does the change impact the rest of the system? Are the relationships among the parts of the system tightly or loosely constructed, and what are the implications of this construction?

To put the matter succinctly, an area which has often been neglected by reform efforts is the structure of educational governance. Iowa, as in many states, is governed under a system which was established prior to the advent of the reform era. The structure may or may not have been adjusted to fit new demands placed on the system by forces as broad as global competition in the work place, a vastly more complex democracy, increasingly sophisticated technology, and more narrowly in terms of special education
Rarely has a holistic view of the system been utilized to restructure. More often relatively isolated policy initiatives for schools to plan or the creation of intermediate agencies to help improve schooling in many ways, have been implemented. The research that this study addresses is that which receives scant attention: the

system as a whole.

A general understanding of the term system leads to an understanding of the need to examine it in its entirety. The definition of system is "a set or arrangement of things so related or connected to form a unity or organic whole" (Webster, 1991). This explanation states that the pieces are arranged and connected. Piecemeal modification then not only changes that unit in question, but also the entire system in its entirety to gain a clear understanding of educational governance in Iowa.

To understand the impact change on the educational system, there must be some understanding of what the system is and how it developed. Since neither the U.S. Constitution nor the Bill of Rights made any provisions for the establishment of a system of public education, the power to do so was left up to each individual state.
stated in the Tenth Amendment, "...powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people."

Since the power to establish a public system of education is left up to each state, each state's constitution must be examined to see how the system is governed. The original Iowa Constitution states, "The educational interest of the State, including Common Schools and other educational institutions, shall be under the management of a Board of Education." While the State Board of Education is charged with developing broad policy for schools, the management of school funds is left under the control of the general assembly (Iowa Code, art. ix, sec 2). How did the complex network including local boards, Area Education Agencies, the State Board of Education, the legislature and institutions of higher education evolve?

The state's role in school reform efforts has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Until the 1980's, the state played a relatively weak role in school reform activity, but recently state policy makers have become more assertive in setting reform agendas. Nationally, more than 300 commissions and committees were established across the states in the early 1980's to address education, and 44 states implemented large scale school reform packages during the 1980's. Iowa has followed this trend by establishing special commissions and task forces, such as
the Pomerantz Commission, to study education in the state. Governors who traditionally have not been central actors in the education policy arena, have played an unprecedented role in school reform activity during the past decade (McCarthy, Langdon, & Olson, 1993, p. 13). Like the commissions, this also played out in Iowa, when then Governor Terry Branstad, declared 1998 the year of education. Simultaneously, both candidates campaigning to be his successor relied heavily on education issues in their respective platforms.

Despite dramatic changes in Iowa's school reform efforts, the dominant state education governance structure continued to be one that was established in the early 20th century. While the optimum configuration of each state's education governance should meet the needs of that particular state's political philosophy and goals, it is difficult to find evidence of instances where structural changes have kept up with changes in philosophy and goals. The few structural changes that have been adopted by states tend to centralize authority in the governor's office (McCarthy, et al., 1993, p.11). Iowa is no different as evidenced by the shift in 1986 from the chief state school officer being an elected position to one which is now appointed by the governor.

There is a constant tinkering with the system pieces, such as the adoption of an AEA accreditation system and potential shift to outcomes based administrator licensing
programs, which has the potential to effect education. However, they still do not get at the broad system changes which could dramatically impact Iowa education.

Campbell and Mazzoni (1976) argued the need to view state educational governance as a system and that the structure of the system does in fact matter.

Formal structure may permit, may actually encourage, certain kinds of behavior on the part of policy makers. Even if changing structure does not guarantee desirable changes in behavior, the fact that it might encourage such changes seems to be sufficient inducement to consider structural arrangements. (p. 433)

The research effort will provide insight for people currently working within the system and for those who are charged with maintenance and improvement of the structure. It will provide an in-depth description of the current structure and provide recommendations for improvements.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of the study was to inform policy makers and educational stakeholders about the structure which governs K-12 education in Iowa. The study provides detailed information to these groups regarding what the current structure looks like, how it works, where the structure is perceived by knowledgeable informants to not
be working, and recommendations for change as suggested by these same knowledgeable persons. The intent of the study was to provide policy recommendations aimed at systemic improvements in the system.

Statement of Problem

The problem of this research effort was to describe and analyze the relationships among state and regional organizations which are responsible for education in Iowa. The study also included description and analysis of problems in the Iowa educational governance structure and recommendations for improvement.

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

(1) What were the relationships among each of the following organizations or agencies?:

- Area Education Agencies,
- The State Board of Education and the State Department of Education
- Local Boards of Education and their operating School Districts
- Institutions of Higher Education
- The Iowa Legislature
(2) In the view of knowledgeable administrators, policy makers, and policy influentials, where was the structure not functioning optimally to support the goals of K-12 education in Iowa?

(3) What recommendations were there for improvement as identified by knowledgeable administrators, policy makers and policy influentials?

**Limitations**

This study was intended to be descriptive in nature. It did not evaluate the performance of individuals or single organizations but provided information on what the educational governance structure in the state of Iowa looked like, how it was working and recommendations for change as seen by those who know the system well through different perspectives. There was no attempt to evaluate public policy or to compare the institutions.

**Methodology**

The study utilized qualitative research, based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1990) designed to generate understanding of what was current reality in Iowa education and to elicit opinions concerning systemic improvements. To provide this kind of enlightenment, the research needed to incorporate a methodology which was
capable of capturing the complex nuances of the current structure and could get at the meaning of the relationships among the organizations as described by the interviewees (Kvale, 1996, p. 3).

Qualitative inquiry was vital to the study in order to understand the many different viewpoints presented in the interviews. The concept which underlies qualitative research theory is that reality is dependent on each participant’s place in the system. Merriam states, "qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities--that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception" (1988, p. 17).

The Components of the System

While the components in the study were parts of the Iowa Educational System, they were in reality separate entities, each with its own clusters of organizations. Each component was an easily identifiable public institution, each in itself a whole system, five connected but individual systems such as separately governed local districts and entirely distinct institutions of higher education. The entire system as well as the complex nature of the relationships among the system components were described as accurately as possible, through knowledgeable informants.
Interviewee Identification

To identify the interviewees, several persons working within, and knowledgeable about, the system were asked to identify individuals with deep understanding of the system and who could offer good insight to the study (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). The interviewee identifiers worked within the five components of the system or in professional organizations which supported the system or its components. Additionally, they had experience working across organizations, in the capacity of AEA division directors and consultants, higher education administrators and extension education consultants, professional organization lobbyists, political party staffers, and school superintendents. They were chosen to nominate interviewees because of their experience with a wide spectrum of people within each organization. Persons working outside of the five organizational parts of the system, but who nevertheless possessed a knowledge of potential interviewees, were also asked to nominate informants for the study.

After giving each of the interviewee identifiers a brief overview of the study, they listed people they felt could provide the knowledge needed. Recurring names of individuals who had knowledge about at least one of the components or component interrelationships served as a possible pool of interviewees. After culling the lists, the potential interviewees were selected. In most cases,
potential interviewees were nominated by at least three identifiers. There was an attempt to balance interviewee representation from each of the five organizational components, but there was not equal representation from each component. Similarly, people who had an in-depth knowledge of the system, but who were not working within the five organizations were not excluded as interviewees.

Selecting interviewees on the basis of their knowledge had advantages. These knowledge elites could provide an overall view of an organization or its relationship to other organizations. Elites were also able to report on their organizations' policies, past histories, and future plans. They contributed insight and meaning to the study because they were at home in the realm of ideas, policies and generalizations (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, pg. 94).

There were also drawbacks to selecting persons who were recognized as having a broad view of the system. These elites may have very different ideas about the relationships between the clusters than most people who are not as well informed. This conflict in understanding is not right or wrong, but the broad view of the meaning of these relationships was the essence of the study.

**Interview Solicitation**

After a group of potential interviewees had been identified, they were contacted by telephone and informed about the purpose of the study. The initial conversation
included information as detailed the following telephone script which can be found in Appendix A.

**Interview Information**

The initial telephone conversation was followed up with information about the study and interview. The mailing included a cover letter with a summary of the telephone conversation, a conceptual overview of the study, and a simple diagram (see Figure 1) of the five components of the system that were the object of this study. The cover letter, conceptual overviews and system diagram can be found in Appendixes B and C.

**Interview Procedure**

Face to face interviews were held whenever possible to query the policy knowledge-elites regarding their view on how to improve the present structure. Two of the interviews were conducted over the telephone, all of the interviews were tape recorded. The following interview questions were used as broad, open-ended queries to "get clear" areas each interviewee saw as most important (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 25): 1) Given your knowledge of how "Iowa Education" works, can you tell me, in your opinion, where are there major problems in the current system? 2) Once again drawing on your background, what recommendations do you have for improvement of the system? These questions were further probed with inquiries concerning efficiency, equity and excellence and how, in the interviewee's opinion, the whole system was working--
how the parts interacted to form a whole. While these questions served as a baseline for the interviews, not all interviews were identical. In order to capitalize on the knowledge and expertise of each interviewee, the interviews were individualized in some measure, delving into issues which were brought up and deemed to be important by the respondents. As Seidman (1991, p. 70) states, "The truly effective question flows from an interviewer’s concentrated listening, engaged interest in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward."

Data Coding

The interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed from the tapes. The hard copies of the interviews were analyzed and coded. This was done by reading each interview, and writing broad, thematic annotations in the margin of the transcription. After rereading the same interview, some of the ideas were grouped into more overarching themes with specific subcodes for specific ideas. This process continued for all of the transcribed interviews. Creswell (1994, p. 155) explains the beginning process of coding.

Pick one interview....Go through it, asking yourself, What is this about? Do not think about the "substance" of the information, but rather its underlying meaning. Write thoughts in the margin. When you have completed this task for several informants, make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics....Now take your list and go back to your data. Abbreviate the topics as codes next to the appropriate segments of the text.... Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place.
As the coding continued some themes from previously analyzed transcriptions were used. In each of the interviews, some new codes were used to most clearly identify the thoughts and nuances in the text. As Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 133) explain, "Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting the data." After all the interviews had been read coded, reread and the codings refined there were over different codes utilized.

Data Sorting

Through the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1994) themes began to emerge. Each interview was labeled with the theme code in the right margin and the initials of the interviewee and the line number in the left margin. By cutting the text and pasting it into a new word document, the similar themes from different interviews were drawn together. For example, a new document was labeled, "Local Control" and each of the lines from the interviews which addressed local control were pasted into the Local Control document with their respective theme and interviewee codes. With this information the original, uncut interview could be used to provide a contextual base for the data. Some of the documents became quite large and difficult to manage, particularly when trying to compare ideas and perhaps move pieces of data among the themes. When they became too large to manage in the word processing document, the documents were printed and the individual pieces of data
were cut into strips. The strips were physically sorted into thematic piles in the same manner that they had been cut and pasted into the word processing document.

After sorting, resorting, coding and refining the codes, themes emerged which clearly pointed to where there were problems in the system. Where themes were not consistent concerning the problems or the recommendations, they were noted. There was not an effort to gain consensus, the purpose being to describe the situation as accurately as possible and to report recommendations from the interviews.

Data Analysis and Presentation

The data were analyzed and presented first by each of the five organizations; the legislature, institutions of higher education, Area Education Agencies, the Department of Education/State Board of Education, and local education agencies. A brief description of the role of the organization in the system is followed by a characterization of that organization in relationship to all other parts. This general overview is followed by the themes which were identified in the coding process described above. These themes were the problems identified by the interviewees as they saw them in each organization vis-a-vis the rest of the system.

After considering by organization, the responses of interviewees in terms of the system as a whole are described. That is, when the knowledgeable insiders
concerning the big picture of Iowa education were asked not about specific organizations but about the system as a whole, they identified several problems.

**Literature and Discussion**

The problems as viewed by the interviewees are recast into several broad issues by combining problems as identified in each section of the Findings. The review of the relevant literature was then woven into these issues as a single consideration of discussion of findings of this study and findings of relevant studies or scholarly literature. Through this approach, efficiency in writing and presentation is gained as only the most direct and relevant literature is cited. In addition it is the intent to draw as much meaning from the interviews as possible.
Chapter 2
FINDINGS

The presentation of the study's findings mirrors the culling of the data into coded clusters grouped around the five organizations of Iowa's education system. Following each of the five headings is a brief description of the role of each organization from the literature and state statute followed by the themes which emerged from the interviews. Following the five organizational headings, the section concludes with the themes which spoke to the entire system.

Legislature

The establishment of public education defaulted to each state when neither the U.S. Constitution nor the Bill of Rights provided for it expressly. Establishing such a system of public of education was a priority for Iowa even before it officially became a state. The subject was addressed by Governor Robert Lucas when the first Territorial legislature of Iowa met in Burlington on November 12, 1838. He declared that where was no matter which he wished to call the attention of the legislature "...more emphatically, than the subject of establishing, at the commencement of our political existence, a well digested system of common schools" (Aurner, 1914, pp. 5-6).
His charge to the group was heeded as evidenced by the provision for education in the Constitution under which Iowa was admitted to the Union in 1846. It stated, "that the general assembly shall encourage, by all suitable means, the promotion of intellectual, scientific, moral and agricultural improvement."

From that time forth, the legislature was responsible for developing the education system for Iowa. While the Iowa general assembly could create a system unique to Iowa, the power to do was similar to that of other states. As Will (1964, p. 7) explains, "State legislatures enact laws to meet the most urgent needs for governmental action; in this way new programs are initiated, old ones are abolished or modified, and the powers and duties essential to carry out the legislative will are delegated to State officials and administrative agencies." Through the passage of laws and delegation of power, the system of Iowa education was created. This powerful position of the legislature and its relationship to the rest of the system was described by the interviewees.

Throughout the interviews the legislature was identified as being the most disconnected from the rest of the system. The isolation appeared to be related to both how legislators saw themselves and their formal role in the system. With the view of "policymaker to the system" legislators were not necessarily dependent on other parts of the system for advice. "I'd say the legislature is
probably a group off by itself. They are a decision making group and they are not what I would call a collaborative group.” Irrespective of their collaborative nature, they were, nevertheless, universally viewed as a potentially highly influential part of the system, being able to influence it in any way they pleased. A Department of Education official put it succinctly: “The legislature is basically tied in through the laws that they pass,” and with this power could override almost anything else in the system. But power notwithstanding, the legislature was not as helpful as it should have been in addressing system issues, according to several observers. Three reasons for this were cited.

Lack of legislative attention to the system

First, while the system was set up to give the legislature the ultimate power for policymaking, this group was not credited for setting strong educational policy for the system as a whole. An AEA respondent felt that “in Iowa they [the legislature] have been about setting mandates, they do not set policy for the state. That is a major problem because if they don’t set policy [for the system], no one else has as much power to do it.” The legislature, it seemed to this official, was effective in passing specific and concrete legislation on current matters of legislative interest, but failed to attend to the system as a whole. A superintendent echoed these ideas. “They [the legislature] are very good at sending
down program mandates but not addressing the larger issues surrounding equity such as school funding, and transportation and other things that keep us separated."

**Poor communication**

Second, the manner in which the system communicated with the legislature was also identified as a problem. The process of information exchange with legislators was very different than with the rest of the system. The director of a professional organization said it this way: "With the legislature we spend more time feeding them information as opposed to responding to their requests. Some groups are better at getting their issues heard." A legislator described it similarly, "Well, generally in this process, if two people talk to you, you have all the information you need....We are sometimes at fault for not getting the breadth of information that we need." Another well placed official agreed. "Sometimes only one or two of the opinions of private citizens will influence a legislator's opinion of what's going on." On the other hand, even while recognizing the communication with the legislature as a major problem, one high ranking state official did acknowledge that the problem was recognized and there were hopes for improvement in this area. "Given the prominence that education has on the agenda of many state and national legislatures, people have begun to see the need for good communication with their legislators."
Education and politics: an uneasy alliance

The third reason given for lack of legislative attention to the system as a whole was best captured by a State Board of Education member who took a very broad look at the issue of politics and education. "It is unfortunate that education has to be a part of government. When you stick it in government, then politics are a major force to deal with. Sometimes what is right politically is not necessarily right for education in terms of meeting the needs of students." As long as education is politically important, the focus of politicians will be on politically hot issues in education, but these are often driven by political perception rather than solid evidence that policy action will have the desired salutary effect.

Institutions of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education are tied to the rest of the system through their role as practitioner preparation providers, and the existence of such preparation programs is necessitated by the provision in the Iowa Code which mandates that a person initially applying for license must have successfully completed a professional education program (Ch. 256.16). The rules for practitioner programs are delineated in Chapter 272.25 of the Iowa Code and include guidelines for practica experiences, program content and faculty development.

Institutions of higher education are statutorily tied to other components of the system in a number of ways.
Faculty in professional education programs must maintain active involvement with schools and participate in team teaching experiences. They are also tied to local districts through a mandate to annually solicit feedback about their program from the education community. Finally, they must provide inservice training for cooperating teachers and show that the evaluation of student teachers is a collaborative effort between the cooperating teacher and supervising faculty member. Another connection to the system is provided through the delegation of power to the State Board to "prescribe standards and procedures for the approval of practitioner programs." While institutions of higher education are tied to the system through statutes, they did not necessarily have a deep collaborative relationship with the other organizations.

If the legislature was the most distant part of the system because of its formal role, higher education was perhaps the most difficult to integrate because of its history, values and role. Five issues were discussed by the interviewees.

Insulation of colleges and universities

Institutions of higher education were, at best, seen as also distant but maybe also prudish and recalcitrant. "Probably the hardest group in this whole niche to really bring in is the colleges and universities. They are so protective and they are so afraid that if it's not done on their campus by their tenured professor, then it is not OK
and not any good and they don’t want any part of it.” In addition to being insulated from the system, a respondent also spoke of their being isolated from one another. “We just hosted a meeting of the four large universities and one of them commented that it was the first time in eleven years that the group had met. I was kind of shocked by that.”

Values and Incentives out of synch with those of the system

One respondent noted the chasm between what was valued and rewarded in higher education as distinguished from values and rewards in the rest of the system. “I think,” she said, that higher education “rewards research, publications and academic freedom. I don’t believe there are any incentives in the system for them [higher education faculty] to connect to the system. I think it is going to vary by individual’s passion for staying a part of the system at the student level.” In short, what we hoped for on behalf of the total system is not what is valued by part of the system.

Lack of a working collaboration with the rest of Iowa’s education system

The focus of the problem was centered around the preparation of teachers and administrators as well as on continued staff development. “The colleges and universities and the AEAs have not maximized their potential to collaborate as much as we could on staff
development, on preservice for teachers and teacher prep, on mentorships or internships for administrators for preparation programs. I think there is a big gap there, a huge gap.”

Reform of teacher education needed

Most people credited the mismatch of higher education with the rest of the system to the value structure of colleges and universities. “LEAs are becoming very frustrated with colleges and universities because they perceive that there is too great an emphasis on research. Personally I think we need something more than student teaching -- we need a long-term internship/mentorship kind of program. I think we really need a major, major overhaul there. I think the Board Ed Examiners and the DE really need to look at revamping that whole preservice experience.”

A dual preparation needed for multiple realities of today and an uncertain future

A respondent from inside the higher education system discussed the problem of always trying to prepare educators for a changing society. “In our preservice programs our goals are to better prepare teachers and administrators for the complex society they are going to have to serve. Iowa has a growing number of special education kids, dysfunctional families, kids who are very bright, and this vast diversity of a growing number of cultures. We have to predict what they [professionals] will need.” Higher
education institutions it seems need to have a bifocal lens in their preparation programs. One lens must focus on the immediate skills needed by students as they begin their professional careers and the other a long-range lens. The latter should focus on a problematic future—one which will require knowledge and skills for different, ever changing needs. Knowing what is needed across widely diverse and highly independent schools in the present and the future, is a balancing act, sure to displease others in the system who have still different perspectives.

Area Education Agencies

In 1974 the legislature enacted a law which dramatically impacted the structure of the Iowa education system when they created Area Education Agencies. Chapter 273.1 of the Code of Iowa outlines the intent of these organizations.

It is the intent of the general assembly to provide an effective, efficient, and economical means of identifying and serving children from under five years of age through grade twelve who require special education...to provide for media services...to provide a method for financing the programs and services; and to avoid duplication of programs and services...and to provide services to services to school districts under contract.

The role of the AEAs automatically connects them to other parts of the system. Funding for the AEAs comes from LEAs, AEA administrators must cooperate with boards of directors to plan services and programs, help them plan for improvement initiatives, and submit plans to the Department of Education. In 1997 a law was passed which provided for
and accreditation process for AEAs which further tied them to the system. In conjunction with the Department of Education AEAs developed process in which the accreditation of all AEAs is reviewed by a team from the Department Education and provisions for programs which do not meet the standards are provided for in Chapter 273.10. The accreditation process had the potential to change the way AEAs do business which some interviewees saw as a needed change.

The point of view from the AEAs is that they were closely connected to the rest of the system through mission, geographic regionalization, and numbers and diversity of their staff. An AEA official saw it this way: "The AEAs play a strong role because our charge is to make the students have, whenever possible, equity of services. We can do that because we are regionalized and we have the capability to draw together lots of different players. We can do a lot of things the DE would have perhaps liked to have done through policy but they don’t have the people power to do." The view of AEA work from the superintendent’s office agrees with the perspective in terms of two of the three AEA broad functions. "In the area of special education and media services there is no question that they do a tremendous job." But the third area with which the AEAs are charged, educational services, fared less well in the eyes of the respondents.
Who’s in charge of school improvement? A paradox in role responsibility

In the third area, that of educational services, “people are asking...how important are these agencies?” The Area Education Agencies, answered a superintendent, assist the schools in change efforts, but the line gets blurred in terms of who is in charge of reform in the district. On one hand, there is help: “I think what is starting to happen with the [AEAs] is that they are supporting...the improvement process.” On the other hand, a lot of schools are starting to say, “hold it” to AEAs that place themselves at the forefront attempting to lead or even force particular improvement efforts.

A legislator saw the tension between the AEAs and the rest of the system differently. "I am a big fan of the AEAs but that is not true statewide. AEAs have a lot of detractors for various reasons. I think the biggest reason is that people really don't understand all the services they offer."

Organizational dysfunctions in AEAs

AEA staff members identified internal issues that in their opinion, prevented AEAs from making as much a contribution to the system as they might otherwise. An AEA administrator was well aware of the tension between the AEAs and the local districts but saw the problem as having to do with the AEA mission. The very nature of the AEA role was causing the problems within the system. "We need
to be in on the cutting edge of doing things for the district but at the same time we need to be very tuned in to what the our local clients' needs are. I am not sure over the course of time that we have done that." This role tension for the AEAs placed a simultaneous emphasis on doing things that were immediately valued, delivering things that could be used on Monday morning, and also leading and supporting policy and practice that is less well known and relatively untried. "Most AEAs," said one, "are still very much sliced into divisions. Part of that is funding streams, part of it's history, part of it is turf, part of it is culture. It is all the same stuff again." In the opinion of these staff, then, there were problems with how the AEAs were structured and governed that focus attention on internal conflict rather than focusing on the external needs of the system. Two of the AEAs "are trying to rearrange, but it has been painful...there is a lot of resistance. I think probably not as much attention was paid to relationships and developing a common core of beliefs and values."

State Department/State Board

The Department of Education was created to "act in a policymaking and advisory capacity and to exercise general supervision over the state system of education" (Ch. 256.1). This broad scope included, among other entities, elementary and secondary schools, and AEAs. Another key role for the department is to "meet the informational needs
of three branches of state government." While not
specified in the law, some saw this role as a two-way,
providing information to the legislature, but also
providing information and interpretation back to the
system.

Along with the Department of Education, the
legislature established a State Board for the department.
The roles of the board demand that it, and the department
work with other organizations in the system. Some of their
responsibilities include adopting policy and rules for the
department, approving practitioner preparation and staff
development programs, hearing appeals from people aggrieved
by local school boards, and adopting five achievement goals
for the state (Ch. 256.7).

A critical partner for local districts

As viewed by a school superintendent, the State
Department's part of the system was doing well and getting
better in the support of schools. He said,

Currently the state department is in kind of a
renaissance time. They are really looking at the way
they serve the local districts. The state department
is taking a look at how we can be a critical friend or
a critical partner as opposed to just a critic or a
dot your "i's" and cross your "t's", send your reports
in and that's that.

Budget and regulation manager

A high ranking administrator within the State
Department explained,

"It (the State Department) is a flow through for some
of the regulations, and not just for Iowa. The State
Department also serves a very integral role in that it
facilitates between the federal government and the
local districts. We have a tremendous amount of special education dollars that flow from the federal level. They really don't come through our legislature at all. They come directly to our state department which we then facilitate the implementation of federal law into the local school districts."

**Broad policy role of the board**

According to several interviewees, the State Board should set the mission for k-12 education in the state and provide a broad policy framework for that mission to be accomplished. A State Board member described the role of the Board broadly, "What we generally do is try to advocate for children and we also try to protect local control. We feel strongly that Iowa is a local control state and we want to preserve that concept." An AEA administrator was the only person outside the State Department and State Board to discuss the role of the State Board of Education. "I think the state board is in a position where they should be asking the broad questions of how our students are doing and how our teachers are doing...The state board needs to set the policy for all children in the state." But they don't really do this, and even if they did, setting the mission is the easy part. Implementation means that you have to let professional educators do their jobs and it means expecting that not everything will turn out as envisioned in policy. A member of the State Board of Education commented on this aspect of their role. "It takes a little doing to understand what it means to make policy instead of micro managing. Then to understand that you can
set wheels in motion but they don't always go the way you would like."

**System integrator**

The State Board and the Department of Education, acting as a single entity, were bringing focus to Iowa's educational system, according to one Department source, and pulling other parts into alignment. "I think right now when we look at the whole system for Iowa, I think there is more and more of a focus by everyone in this system that we've outlined on improving student learning. The AEAs just recently are beginning to be accredited by the State Board of Education, which is a new relationship. Before they were kind of out there by themselves. So that now the State Board and the State Department really accredit the local districts, they accredit the AEAs, and they approve the teacher preparation at the colleges and universities." In the system as envisioned by this respondent from within the Department, all parts of the system other than the legislature were to be integrated by the State Board and DE.

**Local Districts**

Over time the system of Iowa education has evolved into a large, complex statewide organism which from some perspectives surrounds the local districts. Yet schools existed long before there was such a system and even before there was a state. The first school in Iowa was a private venture, but other public schools could be found in the
eastern portion of what is now Iowa as early as 1833 (Aurner, 1914, p. 5). From the advent of the state legislature, there has been a constant tension between centralized and local control. While the power to establish a school was left up to a local community, from its inception the state placed regulations on the school, from length of the school year to preparation requirements for teachers. Today local districts must meet laws which regulate how to elect boards of directors, who districts may employ, what is to be taught, how to raise funds for schools and a myriad of other rules and mandates. It was this constant battle over who was controlling education in the state with which interviewees struggled.

From the local district perspective, the rest of the system existed to support the district. If change was to have any meaning, as local district respondents saw it, it would have to be measured by what happened at the local level. But change was difficult at this level because local professionals didn’t have the time, professional development was not valued by taxpayers, and the way the system actually functioned sent conflicting signals.

**Time**

To be actively and thoughtfully involved in district improvement was seen as difficult. A Department official explained how the lack of time interferes with the cycle of change.

In the majority of these school districts everybody is busy just keeping their heads above water. They can
participate but they don't have time to think. They don't have time to plan, they don't have time to create and they really need facilitation. That's going to have to come from the AEA.

The issue was poignant in that school-based professionals did not have time to be in charge of their own development but if they were not in charge, what meaning did local control have?

Professional Development

In a closely related issue, some respondents commented that professional development was not valued by citizens. Without public support for the "people-costs" associated with school improvement, it was difficult to get deep change to occur. "For people already in the profession we need somehow to help our constituents value professional growth and development time for teachers. There is a pervasive belief out there in the public that time away from kids is of no value to me as a taxpayer. I pay my dollars to have a teacher in the classroom with my kids and nothing else will do." Real change without opportunity to learn and then practice the change was not going to happen, a professor seemed to feel, but opportunity for professional development won't happen without taxpayer support. A higher education respondent who provided staff development explained, "Schools aren't willing to commit the dollars necessary to send people to [staff development] and the programs are fairly expensive, to the point that most educators wouldn't invest the money on their own."

Another higher education respondent went on to emphasize
that the problem is even greater for administrators. "Most boards understand or accept professional growth of teachers. Then you make that step to administrators and there is one person in the district working all by him or herself with no support and no growth."

Governance

Finally, and in reference to both of the immediately prior issues, from the local district perspective of the system, there was an issue of governance. The state talked local control but the state also wanted to make important decisions. "No matter what the state says the local district has to have [its own] vision...It is a real dichotomy because the state claims that it is local control of the system but the local districts often can’t make the decision." The paradox of valuing local autonomy AND state direction, respondents at this level seemed to be saying, created a struggle for balance in the system--how to make it Iowa’s education system but also have it be internally genuinely different in ways significant to local districts. Changing the system, not just the parts

Respondents identified four major reasons why changes in Iowa’s system of public education have been so difficult.

Lack of focus and accountability in the system

An issue that was seen of widespread importance was that without agreement on focus, all the parts working toward the same end, the system would not work as it
A higher education respondent felt great frustration with the separate roles. "It's always them or them or them. Nobody is taking responsibility for all of it." The individual pieces of the system may be focused but those foci may not be in agreement. "The state board has a mission, the school district has a mission, colleges and universities, AEAs all have missions. I'm not sure that the legislature ever decided what their mission is. The whole big piece is to decide on what our one mission is." One respondent put it this way: "It should all be directly focused, that is what the mission should be. In other words, whether it is at the university level, high school level, middle school, legislature, or anything else. All these things have to be focused together on improving student performance." A board member was equally clear: "To me," he said, "the problem is trying to get the five groups...to really be focused on the same thing. [Currently] we are not necessarily focusing on the same target." An agency head agreed on the idea of a common mission but also added the dimension of accountability. "I think we are having a lot more discussion about this whole issue of accountability plus this whole discussion about standards and the politics of that. So I think there is an expectation by a number of individuals that as we get a clearer focus on how kids are really learning and if in fact they are learning that we are going to have to draw together."
Systemic thinkers difficult to find

Linked to the above observation, thinking about the whole system was not something that comes naturally to Iowa policymakers and administrators because the history has been a confederation of parts each with different goals and without an overarching goal. For this reason, persons who think in terms of the system rather than its constituent parts were not particularly valued. As one interviewee put it, "I think they [systemic thinkers] are hard to find. I don’t think the system rewards big thinkers. It doesn’t. It doesn’t hire them, it doesn’t support them, it makes them look weird."

Lack of continuity

With a great deal of turnover of persons in key positions in the system, it was difficult to get consistent and sustained direction in the system. And even where there was continuity, those who had established longevity and consistency were nevertheless heavily influenced by those in the system with relatively short terms.

I think another piece that [we need to look at] is an outgrowth of our political nature [of schooling]... our legislators change, the governor changes, and school board members change. For a superintendent at a local level it is a continuous challenge to educate board members and keep them focused on a direction for more than two to three years. Connected to that is the piece is that the Director of the Department of Ed. is appointed by the governor.

This lack of continuity one respondent pointed out had two sides. First there was a constant turnover of new ideas and emphases in the system, but also this instability
sometimes produced the direct opposite of the supposed effect as professionals became cynical, knowing that any new idea would not last beyond the incumbency of the its proponent. "That whole continuity piece," this respondent said, "becomes a real challenge because people out in the local districts realize, 'we can wait this out' and that sort of thing."

Still another aspect of the lack of continuity, as one agency person saw it, was that in order to get deep and systemic development, people had to be together and work together over a period of time. "The problem is, for sustained change to occur, you have to have people...to hold people's hands almost on a daily basis" and to build personal relationships and networks. It is a theory of change built on "relationships, relationships, relationships.... Find a couple of people who click and dream and have them try to find a couple of other people."

Education is closely tied to politics—and that's a problem

As discussed briefly above, politics were inherent in the governance system of education in Iowa. At the state level as well as the local level, politics played a significant role in determining the education that Iowa's children received. The problem was that politicians were not always thoughtful educators. "I think politics plays a role in the decisions that we make in education in the state of Iowa. I would say that not just at the state
level with the legislature but even at the local level with school boards and to me that implies that we’ve got decision makers who perhaps aren’t real knowledgeable about education and who perhaps don’t have a long term investment in education.” The structure of the education system had been set up to blunt the effect of the vicissitudes of the pulling and hauling of politics. Two systems, one based on knowledge of kids and learning, the other based on perceptions and votes were bound to have some conflict. The conflict assured that the harmony which was sought in the system—the unity expressed above that “it should all be directly focused”—would be hard to come by, at least at other than an agreement in the abstract. The central problem, if Iowa were to have a "system" to establish and support public education, lay deep in the system itself; that was the one thing to which no one was attending.
Chapter 3
REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the study provided a perspective of Iowa education from those working within or close to the system. The literature, while not specifically speaking about Iowa, provides valuable information for the study. The following incorporates a review of this body of literature interwoven with a discussion.

The Iowa Twin Mantras: Local Control and Professional Decision-Making

It was clear from the findings presented earlier that the historical roots of education in Iowa still hold sway in the language of Iowa politicians and educators. The preferred view remains that those decisions are best that are made locally and that where possible, decisions about education are best left to the educators.

Nevertheless, throughout the interviews conflicts were expressed about these values. First, it was acknowledged, even if often implicitly more than explicitly, that the state as well as local districts also had the right and the responsibility to make important decisions in education. Second, regardless of rights and responsibilities, misgivings were expressed that state policy and politics were fully capable of guiding Iowa school reform. This
section on the “twin mantras” deals first with the governance aspect of this conflict and secondly with the conflict between political knowledge and educational knowledge.

Governance

From the description of findings the reader will remember that one respondent pointed out that the state liked to talk as if Iowa is a real local control state, but “local districts often can’t make the decision.” A state policymaker underscored another view: “we feel strongly that Iowa is a local control state and we want to preserve that concept.” Clearly, local districts in Iowa, as in all states, were legally dependent upon the state for their authority (Wirt & Kirst, 1997, p. 20). But a long culture of governance of education across the U.S. tells another story, says Kirst. “The doctrine of local control of public schools occupies a long and much revered place in American political ideology. Once heralded as a minor ‘branch of theology,’” (Kirst, 1987, p. 381), the concept of local control has achieved mythical proportions. It has been only in recent decades that this culture has started to change.

Education had rather recently become prominent on the Iowa Legislative agenda, said a respondent, a mirror of what was happening nationwide. In one sense, education was just aligning with many other spheres of government as the concept of local control clashed with another revered
notion in American government, that of federalism (Rabe & Peterson, 1986). In federalism it is recognized that "Few governmental organizations...have the capacity to solve the problems confronting them without the assistance or support of other governments. [Federalism] is a conceptualization of how to resolve problems among the constituent governments in the federal system which recognizes at the same time the vast complexity and interdependence" (Florestano & Maldonado, 1982, p. 301) among the levels as well as the independence of each level.

The implications of federalism for management of schools include such issues as the extent of centralization/decentralization of authority among units, the extent of conflict and cooperation among governments, the relationship between values of professionalism and citizen needs, the extent of unity and diversity among the constituent federal components on varying issues, the impact of federalism on problem solving, and whether the extent of growing national influence and control represents decay of the system itself. (Morando and Florestano, 1990, p. 293)

The clash between local control and the federalist concept of healthy cooperation and coordination among levels of government is a clash between an historically established concept in education, local control, being challenged by an equally historic concept in general government. For over a century, local control held sway. Now the tide is running in favor of federalism, but with increasing power being shifted toward the state. The reasons for this shift have already been considered, but the practical effect has been to make education considerably less locally controlled. As Wirt and Kirst see
it, "as a result of these changing internal and external forces, the discretionary zone of local superintendents and boards has been progressively squeezed into a smaller and smaller area" (Wirt and Kirst, 1997, p. 49).

The problem with this state-driven policy agenda, as some of the interviewees saw and is made crystal clear in the literature, is that what might make sense politically and even legally, may not succeed educationally (Loveless, 1998). The central issue was that policy design did not account for implementation realities. A recent study of school reform by the Rand Corporation summarized the difficulty.

 Designs [for reform] often favored innovative education methods over compliance with existing rules, regulations, and educational practices. Schools, however, had to implement these designs within well-established bureaucratic constraints. Many designs required that schools possess independent decision making authority over their curriculum, personnel, professional development, and budget. Generally, the schools lacked this authority. (Rand, 1998, p. 2)

Legal, and often constitutional authority was clearly on the side of the state in these matters, but what in fact was needed to make the system work was evidently quite a different matter.

A former federal education official and now a member of a prominent conservative think-tank put it succinctly: "Schools in a given system or state are apt to be similar with respect to relatively superficial matters but dissimilar along dimensions that matter more." (Chester Finn in Kirst, 1987, p. 394). Amidst these conflicting
pressures, Iowa policy-makers seemed to see, on the one hand, the need for the state to become involved in education, but on the other hand wishing to honor the near-sacred concept of local control. There was perhaps an implicit understanding that state policy was important for order and consistency among schools, but as McLaughlin put it over a decade ago, often "policy can't mandate what matters" (McLaughlin, 1989, pp. 9-10).

Political Knowledge and Educational Knowledge

Politics and education conflicted in Iowa. The result was not necessarily good for the children and youth of Iowa that the system was supposed to be serving: "Sometimes what is right politically is not necessarily right for education in terms of meeting the needs of students." The issue was that when crucial decisions were out of the hands professional educators, you got people who, according to one respondent, "aren't real knowledgeable" but also who "don't have a long-term interest in education." Even more, the reader may remember that a policy-maker acknowledged that legislators do not set good examples of trying to get at a breadth or depth of information on a topic. "Well... if two people talk to you, you have all the information you need." As a state official familiar with the legislative process averred, it was frighteningly easy to influence legislation--sometimes with "only one or two of the opinions of private citizens."
How politicians got information may not have been news, but with the shift towards more state policy-maker decisions in education, it did make for a new situation as the twentieth century came to a close. As described in the first section of this discussion, the influence of politics may be thought of as shifting back to a situation not entirely unlike it was at the beginning of the century when education was totally in the hands of elected representatives, and driven by politics. The level was different but the game was the same.

It was from that starting point that Americans picked up the mantra that “politics and education do not mix,” an “unspoken and longstanding agreement” among “American citizens and scholars [who] have contended that the world of education is and should be separate from the world of politics.” There was a decades-long “silent conspiracy to maintain the myth” (Wirt & Kirst, 1982, p. 2). For that reason, “up until recent decades starting in the 1960s, most of the answers were provided by school professionals” (Wirt & Kirst, 1982, p. 5).

If it was a conspiracy, as Wirt and Kirst claim, it was one in which the American public was often in collusion. This was because, as E.J. Dionne reminds us, Americans hate politics because politicians, and the two major political parties, tend to be out for their own interests or at least do not represent the people’s interest (Dionne, 1991). Even if educators were not quite
doing the job at home, the alternative of having politicians involved in the specifics of schooling was not a savory option according to these political observers.

As in the case of local control versus a dynamic, multi-governmental federalism, the issue of who should decide left no easy choices. "The links between politics and education are clearly not new, but two disagreements arise over this tie. How do schools and politics relate to one another as a matter of fact and how should they relate as a matter of value?" (Wirt & Kirst, 1997, p. 65). Once again, the respondents in this study seemed to be unsure of how to redress a system that all agreed needed adjustment, but for which every solution added its own problem set.

Lack of Collaboration in the System

One of the most unambiguous findings of this study was the agreement among interviewees that the several parts of Iowa's education system did not form a well-planned and cohesive whole. There were a variety of very blunt opinions: "To me the problem is trying to get the five groups to really be focused on the same thing." Or even more candidly: "There needs to be collaboration at the state level among the various groups. That's a critical issue. I can't say that is happening."

The federalist concept described above framed the issue as a state-local conflict and a political framework viewed it as a question of knowledge and control. In the following discussion, the system is seen more as an inter-
organizational issue. In this perspective, jealously guarded and historically held ground would not be given up easily.

One interviewee saw the organizational problem in historical and pragmatic terms, suggesting that each part has had its own, largely self-defined and independent role, an historical fact that made coming together at best more a matter of happenstance than planning. If it didn’t just happen to happen, then there wasn’t collaboration. This was not tantamount to accepting the way things were, but a recognition that “in order for us to achieve our goals, it requires the cooperation and collaboration by all the key players. I think that’s either a lesson that hasn’t been learned from the other groups, or they refuse to acknowledge what good could come from collaboration.”

Perhaps the best example of the commonly held view exposed the root of the problem. The example came from higher education, and though the situation is different in every part of the system, the problem was equally deeply systemic: “I don’t believe there are any incentives in the system for them [higher education faculty] to connect to the system.” This view suggested a review of not just structure but of the underlying assumptions upon which the structure had developed. Commenting about state education systems across the U.S., Sarason (1998) claims that they are uncoordinated systems, the parts of which are not and cannot be in agreement ever about any one overarching
purpose of education. Add to that different motivations for what they are doing, it was obviously difficult to figure out how the parts would mesh.

With a wide agreement on the lack of coordination among the parts of the system, however, it was not the case that interviewees were disinterested in asking and pressing for an answer to the question "Who Is In Charge?" As Wirt and Kirst saw it, the turbulence among organizations involved in the governance of education has led to that very question—and an unsettling answer: "Who is in charge? Amid the complexity of new groups and governments, the answer may be--no one" (Wirt & Kirst, 1997, p. 47). Sarason (1998) asks the question a bit differently, but the response is equally chilling. "Who is responsible—that is, who should be held accountable? The fact is that the governance system of education makes assignment of accountability virtually impossible.... Informally, it is an adversarial system [emphasis added; 1996, pp. 11-12].

From an organizational perspective, then, as seen by participants in this study and from organizational literature, it was hard to tell who, if anybody, was in charge and who was responsible for how the parts worked together. The question centered on the parts of the system, their interconnection in the larger system, and how they affected, positively and negatively, what happened in the school (Sarason, 1998, p. 29).
Boring even further into the problem of the governance of education from an organizational perspective, Morando and Florestano look at the variation among the sectors that made up the education system. The parts of the system could be professionally managed as the independent units that they are, they say, but with the emphasis on good management in a larger political environment, "it is unclear who is the target of making things better: citizens, other bureaucrats, or perhaps, other politicians" (Morando & Florestano, 1990, p. 309).

The way the system was currently structured, each part largely took care of itself, though the goals of one part affected the goals of another and each goal acted as a constraint on the system. "From the governmental levels perspective, decisions within one governmental unit can be treated as more or less constraints on other [units]" (Mitchell, 1986, p. 21). One respondent in this study pointed approvingly to each of the parts of the Iowa education system (except the legislature) as having its own defined set of goals or mission. But Senge extended Mitchell's argument in suggesting that a mission for each part exacerbates the problem of the system as it places the primacy of the parts over the system. This, he says, is a bit of naïve realism (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994, pp. 25-27) if our aim is to have a true system. The parts, Mitchell argued, must align with the whole, not the other way around.
On the other hand, there has been over the decades a culture built up around the governance of education that should be looked at as well as the structural and functional perspectives. Coordination in this analysis functions almost as a "hidden hand." Marshall, in a study of education cultures within schools, viewed it this way: "...many micropolitical interactions are submerged, quiet, unstated, even unnoticed." Educators keep differences to themselves; they privatize the conflicts (Schattschneider, 1960, pp. 71-77). "So much of the politics of education is about "the avoidance of conflict," the unseen negotiation of boundaries and turf, and the "remaking" of policy through implementation. Much gets overlooked, Marshall asserts, as people compromise over issues of equity, quality, efficiency and choice (Marshall, 1991, p. 143). In short, the culture of education was that you don't rock the boat; maybe it was not optimum but as long as it works to some level of satisfaction, that's good enough.

Thomas Anton confirmed the importance of these policy and administrative cultures across broad expanses of government as these become habits and traditions which affect intergovernmental relationships. But he also made a different point that maybe outward signs of collaboration are not needed to signify actual coordination. "The absence of visible attempts to coordinate does not mean an absence of coordination...tacit coordination among governments is shown by their refusal to invade another's
turf...visible coordination is seldom necessary." He continued in arguing that, "'visible conflicts over jurisdictional space are a sign that existing coordination has broken down'" (Anton as cited in Morando & Florestano, 1984, p. 303). Wildavsky put it trenchantly: Coordination does not require a coordinator; coordination will take place if there is mutual benefit (Wildavsky, 1979, p. 115). What you don’t see, the somewhat counterintuitive argument goes, may be the most important sign that the system is functioning reasonably well.

The time to worry, perhaps, is when the parts are screaming at one another. The view expressed by these academics, of course, does not suggest a lack of a problem with the education system in Iowa, but it does raise questions that may well be responded to before a system overhaul is attempted.

**Taking Responsibility for the Whole System?**

A question about responsibility for the whole system of education connects to but is substantially different from the perspectives discussed to this point. State-local conflicts, politics and knowledge, and inter-organizational issues fly below the radar of a focus on the system itself—its basic assumptions, its structure, and how it in fact functioned.

Recall the voice of one respondent that seemed a plaintive cry that the Iowa way of addressing responsibility for the system was for every part of the
system to blame every other part. "We've spent all this
time and energy blaming each other...it's always them or
then or them. Nobody is taking responsibility for all of
it." We may recall also the AEA respondent who blamed the
lack of responsibility on the fact that there is no person
within the system whose job it was to review the whole
system. The irony, if that view may be interpreted, was
that the system created the people who in turn thought
within the constraints of the system. The system did not
seek or reward those who think outside of what is currently
in place. So, in this view, the system is stuck; it is in

There is also a hint that the reason for Iowa's
disjointed system was that no one felt that their part had
the right or perhaps the responsibility for the system qua
system. The education system had become simply the "way we
do things." Over the decades the basics of the system had
become so deeply ingrained that nobody even thought much
about it. It was historically dependent, but nobody thought
of it that way.

Whatever one viewed as the reason for the problem, it
seemed clear that the problem was not one in Iowa alone.
Sarason described the same issue in state education systems
nationwide. Nobody either "in" the systems or even
influencing the systems directly "willed" the system
(Sarason, 1998, p. 141). Like topsy, over time they just
"grewed." Now the current inhabitants, today's educators,
live in their professional ancestor's creations, largely accepting them as they are. "There are no villains," Sarason says, "but there is a system that is the villain" (p. 141). Yesterday's solution, the system devised to deliver education in another time and place, is today's problem.

If there was disagreement in terms of the source of the problem, there was nevertheless widespread disagreement about how to address the problem. The respondents seemed to agree that some change was needed, but the lack of agreement about what the real problem was and who should take the lead in addressing it was far from clear. Likely, as H.L. Mencken's reminds us, "for every major problem there is a simple answer that is wrong" (cited by Sarason, 1998, p. 30), but knowing that the issue was complex was only a beginning; the fundamental issue of how to fix the system remained to be determined. It is to this question that we will now turn.

Are there Clues as to Where to Begin a Study of Iowa's Education System?

The final section of this discussion of the findings takes a decided shift from a descriptive to a more normative view, from how the system does in fact work to participants' and scholars' views of how the system might work. To gain a normative perspective on what the interviewees said, it was clear that while they addressed their views on what the system needed, the leap from "what
is" to how to go about redesigning the system had to be interpreted from their more implicit argument.

Five views of system reform are reviewed: (1) a lack of coordination in the system, (2) the need for broad goals and missions for the system, (3) the need for more accountability, and (4) a systemic view by which to reformulate the system. The fifth perspective was added from the researcher knowledge of recent legislative activity in Iowa and in other states and from the literature. That view involved a repoliticization of education.

The normative interpretations made in this part of the discussion were reasoned as follows: if interviewees felt there was a "need," or a lack of something, its obverse was valued. This section will discuss these views from Iowans about the Iowa system of education, along with ideas from the literature, as prologue to making recommendations in the next chapter for Iowa policy-makers concerning the system.

**More Coordination from the Top: Aligning the Parts**

Restructuring Iowa's education governance by incremental alignment of the parts was how several respondents saw the necessary change occurring. One respondent, for example, cited the State Board and the State Department of Education mission statements as guiding AEA accreditation, the accreditation of local districts, and the accreditation of teacher accreditation programs.
In this thinking, aligning was occurring through institutional control by one of the parts. The process was incremental and pragmatic, logical and at least superficially accountable. Morando and Florestano (1990) view this means of reform as a management perspective of the state system merged with the more recently emerged political notion of education and conceptualized as a classic bureaucratic model with a top, middle, and bottom level.

No one argued the legal right of states to control education in this way, but researchers did call attention to the practical effects of such control. A system put together for such administrative reasons, said Hargreaves, will not work well for teaching and learning. "They are systems of state regulation and control in which the business of conception and planning is increasingly separated from that of technical execution."

A somewhat different argument was made by Chubb and Moe as portrayed by Blase:

"Given the hierarchical structure of public schools and the political nature of public education in the U.S., school administrators... can be expected to use coercive forms of power in attempting to control teachers in order to make the alignments work. Indeed, they are legally obligated to do so. However, important qualitative dimensions of teacher involvement in the daily life of schools (e.g., commitment, empathy, tolerance) may be seriously undermined if the exercise of authority by others violates professional values and norms" (Blase, 1991, p. 202).

It is in part these norms and values addressed by what Wise (1979) termed "hyperrationalization" of the schools. His
fear was that state and federally-driven policy reform would cause schools to become, to use Wildavsky's phrase, externally accountable but internally vacuous.

More Direction from the Top: Missions and Goals

In a move away from mere realignment with the current system, the point has been discussed that respondents explicitly proposed more uniform mission and goal statements for the several parts of the system. Making commitments to broad, generally agreed upon statements, one might reasonably assume, should cause the system to be more effective and efficient. As a theoretical model, it is logical, deductive and provides for highly visible linkages among the parts (Scott, 1998).

The political and organizational satisfaction in aligning the parts from the top down, however, has certain drawbacks. There have been a great variety of studies on different attempts to connect the system in this way (Odden, 1991). The results have been mixed. Some suggest that state policy can be successful in guiding reform of schools, but with caveats concerning the need for considerable support for local districts in implementation. Others, such as Hargreaves, provided even more caution to this avenue of reform. "It is an issue of commitment to unwriting the details of board-or state-driven curriculum guidelines, to giving communities of teachers the necessary flexibility to work with each other in developing programs of their own" (1991, p. 69).
It was not that state governments should not attempt to lead and make decisions regarding education, but a clear signal that in order to be effective, state policy must take account not only of the legal context in which such policy is made, but also the educational context in which the policy is implemented.

In addition, if policy is expected to be effective in this framework, it must meet the requirements of the theoretical underpinnings of the policy. At a general level, Wildavsky (1979) speaks directly to the underlying assumptions of state-driven policy which stems from planning for mission statements and goals. The theory is, he says, that the ends are known at the start and the logic of ends-means is clear. Right variables are in the right order with known relationships and predictable outcomes. If you don’t believe that these assumptions hold, he suggests, then the model probably will not work. The system will end up with a great deal of paperwork but not much else to show for the effort.

Others suggest a less rational model, though still assuming broad agreement about the ends sought as a beginning point. Basically, the idea is to secure a strong moral commitment among the participants in the system. From there, many things are possible. Senge suggests that “committing to live by certain basic values... undermines internal conflict” (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994, p. 275) a propositional statement that committing to
something larger trumps self-interest, including the organizational self-interest that was found to be a part of the current Iowa system of education.

More specifically, in a school-level study, Greenfield (1991, p. 163) found some support for this idea. Educators responded to a firm moral commitment: "a moral belief in and commitment to serving the best interests of children"... this moral commitment was the "primary source of power" to lead the school. The trick at the state level would be in creating a school-like environment, one capable of translating trust and personal commitments broadly to the state's educators.

What Students Learn: Systems Accountability and Results Focus

Interviewees affirmed a vigorous interest in Iowa in accountability, particularly accountability in terms of what students were learning. One administrator put it this way: "I think we are having a lot more discussion about this whole issue of accountability plus this whole discussion about standards...[about what] kids are really learning and if in fact they are learning."

The theory is that one starts at the other end of the hierarchy from broad mission and goal statements and, through a process of backward mapping (Elmore, 1979-80, p. 601), attempts to link the system, with a focus on the results one wishes to achieve. As viewed in the current research, the interviewees who suggested this approach were
making a statement about the need for more change than the above two approaches. It is worth consideration as a means to drive change in the system though it has its own problems according to research in the area.

Some research simply questions what gets measured in results-based systems. Short-term achievement over long-term intellectual development is one concern; another is forcing teachers “to emphasize their roles as ‘achievement producers’ at the expense of... child nurture and development.” (Mitchell, 1986, p. 14-16). A concern about the assumptions of governance was the focus of a study by some 30 researchers who concluded that strong accountability measures suppose “a higher coherence between purposes, structures, legitimization and culture in educational institutions and systems” (Macpherson, 1997) than is often the case. A results focus in practice usually comes to rest the responsibility more on those closest to the implementation and says little about how the total system is operating. We need more study, says Macpherson (1997), in order to understand the performance of the education system in relation to student performance, a research process that requires time and the patience to learn as we go.

As Wise puts it, results alone say nothing about how the system actually works (Wise, 1979) and until we understand how things actually work, we’ll not know how well the total system is really working to support student
learning. Another view of system performance appears in Osborne and Gaebler’s *Reinventing Government* (1992, p. 156), which asks, for example, “are performance measures aimed at the parts as well as the whole system? are we even reasonably certain where a problem is a design problem or an implementation problem or a implementor problem?”

In any case, Morando and Florestano (1990) assert, accountability for results is itself a political exercise “worked out in a context of pluralism, differentiated powers, and contested structures.” Public organizations need to be held answerable for what they do, he says, but in order for that to happen at the system level, mechanisms need to be developed appropriate to “multiorganizational policy making and implementation processes.” (304) This is not so much an implementation problem but a so far nearly intractable policy and evaluation problem.

**Systemic Thinking**

In the broadest terms, there was a recognition among Iowans interviewed for this study that systemic change might be required to develop a new system of education suitable for a new age. It was recognized that significant change had occurred in the educational environment, one respondent pointing out, for example, that the increased role of the legislature, not only in Iowa but in all states, had shifted a great deal of discussion from local boards to the statehouse. As England’s Prime Minister Tony Blair put it, if the world changes, the governing structures
have to change with it (Yergin, 1998, p. 366). And if, as in global politics and markets, the world changes enough, there may not be what Dionne (1991, p. 152) calls a "usable past" to guide us in remaking the system. In this scenario, the total structure, the assumptions and the most cherished niches of power and authority would be on the table.

A policy analyst couched the sweep of alternatives for reform as basically one of two views.

Comprehensive education reform involves a realignment of the functional relationships structured in the educational organization in a particular state. For example, reform may significantly alter the relationships between state boards of education, school districts, and schools, while the organizational components of the system remain intact. Systemwide change... involves a total realignment, or overhaul of both the organizational structure and functional components of a state educational system. (Lane, 1998, p. 7)

It is perhaps the latter that one interviewee may have had in mind, stating bluntly: "I think we should rethink the whole system."

"Up until now," says Sarason (1998, p. 64), "reform efforts have dealt with this or that part--really parts of parts--as if the system in which those parts are embedded does not present mammoth obstacles or does not support attitudes, practices and purposes inimical to reform." It is a view which suggests that there was little alternative but to think in terms of a massive overhaul of the system. Individual schools improved under the current system, but as Finn wrote earlier and more current research has confirmed, these singular improvements are not often
transferred through the district or to other schools out of the district (Lane, 1998, p. 10).

Citizen Control: Back to the Future or Something New in Public Education?

Not considered by the respondents in this study, but a strategy very much on the political forefront in the very late twentieth century was citizen assertion of more control over their children's schooling. This may best be typified by the charter school legislation passed by over 30 states as of this writing. In Iowa the legislation was passed in 1998, only to be vetoed by the governor. It is expected to reappear soon. But whether a Chicago-style policy of individual school citizen councils, reminiscent of the late nineteenth century citizen boards or of the experiments in citizen control in the 1960s, or, quite differently, some version of school choice such as charter schools, a distinct education policy direction in the U.S. was towards more citizen voice in schooling.

The change in this direction was confirmed by Corbett (1991, p. 73) in a recent study: whatever the history of the "change in the control of education," he said, "the fact is that the public is becoming an increasingly integral force in educators' decision making." The rallying rationale seemed to follow one of two strands. The first was that assuring more control through democratic institutions would give citizens important leverage where it could do the most good—at the local level. Chester
Finn, cited earlier, provided an example of the educational rationale for this view. An expression of the political rationale was provided by Reich (1988): "democracy appears to be a system for turning the work of the community back over to the community... that is, back to where the work can be done" (p. 202). David Mathews (1996) personalized the political view in averring that people want better service and more efficiency from government, but most of all they "want a different relationship" (p. 25) with governmental institutions and those who staff them. A successful government is one in which citizens "claim responsibility for and act on their problems" (p. 24).

The choice movement has gained momentum through several concepts of direct voice by parents, but especially gaining momentum in the Iowa legislature during the course of this study was the Charter School concept. In this idea, the money for a child's education followed the child and the parents chose which public charter school their child would attend. The rationale for the charter school consisted of three parts. First, it followed the market concept of fostering competition—reasoning that competition makes schools better—second, charter schools would be free of red tape and bureaucracy, and third, charters would permit vastly more site-based management so that schools could make decisions that made sense to them.

Citizen choice as a basis for change, a political reality at the close of the twentieth century, differs
dramatically from the other options in that it draws a major divide between two competing conceptions of political thought. Large and complex systems with missions, professional bureaucracies, coordinating bodies, accountability systems and the like stand in stark contrast to a political free market of ideas and institutions. Isaiah Berlin (1996) sums up the very different conceptions of governance this way:

The history of political thought, has, to a large degree, consisted in a duel between these two great rival conceptions of society. On one side stand the advocates of pluralism and variety and an open market for ideas, an order of things that involves clashes and the constant need for conciliation, adjustment, balance, an order that is always in a condition of imperfect equilibrium, which is required to be maintained by conscious effort. On the other side are to be found those who believe that this precarious condition is a form of chronic social and personal disease, since health consists in unity, peace, the elimination of the very possibility of disagreement, the recognition of only one end or set of non-conflicting ends as being alone rational. (p. 121)

This discussion of alternative ways of reforming the education system suggests a broad array of ideas, starting with the pragmatic and incremental tinkering with the then-current system to a complete overhaul, based on a radical reassignment of who controls and how the system would be structured. Those who responded to the interviews that formed the basis for this research saw problems, but were not of one accord among themselves as to how those problems should be addressed. Nor were they as critical of each approach as the academic researchers who provided an
outside look, for purposes of this discussion, at the Iowa education system.

Aside from providing critical analysis of each alternative proposed, scholars provided ideas at opposite poles from the interviewees. First, some scholarship suggested that Iowa may not be looking deeply enough at the level of collaboration and cooperation currently existing among the parts. What we see is not necessarily what we get. Coordination can happen without a coordinator. And in an entirely different take, outside voices suggested an alternative that would require that the system be reconstructed under the assumptions of a very different political philosophy. Recommendations to policy-makers will consider all of these voices in the following chapter.
Chapter 4
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Over the past several years the education system in Iowa has been experiencing a variety of reform and improvement efforts. The AEAs now have an accreditation process, LEAs must create and follow plans for school improvement, and the Iowa Legislature has declared education to be a top priority. While there has been a great deal of tinkering with the parts, there has been no broad evaluation of the system which examined how the pieces are or are not working together.

The purpose of this study was to inform policy makers and educational stakeholders about the structure which governed K-12 education in Iowa. The study also provided information regarding where the structure was perceived by knowledgeable informants to not be working, and recommendations for change as suggested by these same knowledgeable persons.

The problem of this research effort was to describe and analyze the relationships among state and regional organizations which were responsible for education in Iowa.
and identify recommendations for improvement for the system.

The following research questions addressed these issues: (a) What were the relationships among each of the following organizations or agencies: Area Education Agencies, the State Board of Education and the State Department of Education, Local Boards of Education and their operating School Districts, Institutions of Higher Education, and the Iowa Legislature? (b) In the view of knowledgeable administrators, policy makers, and policy influentials, where was the structure not functioning optimally to support the goals of K-12 education in Iowa? (c) What recommendations were there for improvement as identified by knowledgeable administrators, policy makers and policy influentials?

The research included interviews of people considered to be knowledgeable elites with respect to the Iowa education system. The interviewees included persons working within each of the five organizations, many of whom had been affiliated with more than one of the organizations, and those people outside the system who had insight into the system. Using a semi-structured interview format, the researcher conducted the majority of the interviews in a face to face setting. Each interview was tape recorded and then transcribed. The researcher then read each interview and coded the documents to identify ideas and concepts in each interview. Through reading,
rereading, coding and recoding each interview the researcher was able to identify themes from the data. Through this analysis of the data, the following overarching ideas were identified.

The system did not operate as an interconnected system but as separate pieces, each with its own function. To varying degrees, but with the legislature and institutions of higher education being the outliers, the five organizations were not working together. This was a result of poor communication, but also a discrepancy in what each values.

The impact of politics on the system was viewed as having a negative impact. There was a belief that many decisions were made for political reasons rather than for the improvement of the lives of Iowa's children and even less concern for the system itself.

There was a long-standing, yet valued emphasis on local control of education in Iowa. Local control was identified as a hallmark of education in the state yet it was in direct conflict with what some identified as ways in which to improve education in the state. This created a tension around not only the question of "who governs," but who should, and can govern.
Conclusions

The study of Iowa's education system yielded three broad conclusions. Taken together, these conclusions suggested that the current system, without a major infusion of energy, would at most change incrementally. The way the system is, is the way it was--and for some that's the way it should be.

The Iowa education system had developed over the course of a century and a half, adding structures and expanding functions of existing structures without clear planning for an integration among the existing parts. It is not evident that there was much value placed on the development of interorganizational relationships. The evolution is even now continuing without a studied and coherent view as to how it might renew itself, an absence that has, it was surmised, encouraged people from within the system to accept the current structure as the way things should be. Design carefully, the remedy may be worse than the disease.

There was a widely shared belief that the current means of delivering education would be improved by more tightly coupling existing organizations. While respondents were clear that they felt that more integration of the system needed to occur through organizational realignment, the decentralist view of local control suggested a countervailing value at work deep within the state.
political culture. Relevant literature also pointed out that, in fact, it was possible that the system may be already more integrated than meets the eye, and in any case, tight coupling could have unintended and unwanted consequences. At the very least, without specific evidence of how the total system was working, a remedy cure to the system before its disease was more carefully diagnosed could be harmful.

Two visions: more state control versus local citizen choice

Two fundamentally different views of the future grew out of this study. Respondents provided glimpses of a system highly organized and tightly coupled, from a single coordinating agency to inter-agency system goals, and from accountability based on student results to broad and deep system-wide planning. On the other hand, from the literature and from current policy and practice in Iowa, more local citizen choice provided a vision of governance for Iowa schools that was radically decentralized, a vision at the end of the century, that was in some respects not unlike the pattern of governance at the beginning of the century.

Do we have what we need? Do we need what we have?

While neither the findings, literature or synthesis of the information answers these questions absolutely, an answer can be inferred. It is clear that Iowa does need the functions performed by each organization, but not necessarily as delegated through the current structure.
Interviewees were clear in their responses to the roles and problems with the current system, but not with what a better system would look like. The problem then lies in designing and creating a structure which better meets the needs of the system without having a blueprint which details what the structure would look like and how to get there from the current structure. We have what we need, but we don't necessarily need what we have.

**Recommendations for Policy Makers**

The findings from the study may not have provided a blueprint for the future, but the absence of a specific answer set the stage for what could be done to improve the system. The first recommendation would be to establish a Legislative or Governor's Commission on the Governance of Education and charge them to undertake a study of the system. An in-depth study, backed by policy makers, would have the influence to reach those persons within the system who may have been less serious about sharing their views in the present research and to reach a far wider audience than this exploratory effort. This type of broad sweeping study could therefore more thoroughly identify areas of current system dysfunction and disconnects and perhaps better establish the means for improvement. This would be a crucial step to undertake before attempting to change the current system.
A second recommendation is to identify the focus of the system. In discussions with interviewees, there was an implicit underlying philosophy that children were at the center of the system. In direct contrast, many of their comments illustrated that other issues drove decisions and the system. The desire to have a central focus was supported in the literature, and in fact was credited as the way to building a collaborative system. A central focus would serve as a northstar to guide the direction and working of the system.

Recommendations for Further Study

Both the findings of the study and the recommendations to policy makers indicate areas which future research is required. A study which investigates how the system is working, which goes beyond the interviewees' perceptions of the relationships, would provide more in-depth information on the current system. This information would be invaluable to reforming the system.

A second area of investigation is to study how the system learns from itself. Little evidence of intra- or interorganizational learning came out of the interviews. This information could provide a critical piece for future system renewal.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

TELEPHONE SCRIPT

I am working on a study involving the education system in the state of Iowa. In particular, the study will focus on a system wide view of educational governance in our state.

The purpose of the study is to inform policymakers and educational stakeholders about the K-12 education governance structure in the state of Iowa. The study will describe and analyze what the current structure looks like, where the structure isn't working and recommendations for change.

The study will include interviews of leaders who know Iowa education and who can offer insight into improving the current system. After the completion of the study the findings and recommendations will be sent to you.

I have spoken with several people to gather a list of persons who are knowledgeable about the Iowa educational system. You have been selected not only because of your position within the system but also because of your knowledge about how the system is working. Your system wide view is a crucial factor in developing recommendations which have the potential to improve education in our state. Several people have named you as someone who has a deep
understanding of Iowa education. I would like to interview you as part of the study.

During the interview we will be discussing five clusters or groupings of organizations which are responsible for education in Iowa. The focus will be on the role of all the Area Education Agencies across the state, not the functioning of a specific AEA. We will not be discussing one college in particular but institutions of higher education and their function to certify personnel.

Interviews will focus on the relationships among the organizations. Where are there major system problems? What is your advice for change so that the system can better facilitate improvement in Iowa education?
Dear name,

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of a study on the Iowa education system. You have been selected not only because of your position within the system but also because of your knowledge about how the system is working. Your system wide view is a crucial factor in developing recommendations which have the potential to improve education in our state.

During the interview we will be discussing five clusters or groupings of organizations which are responsible for education in Iowa. The enclosed diagram illustrates the groupings. The focus will be on the role of all the Area Education Agencies across the state, not the functioning of a specific AEA. We will not be discussing one college in particular but institutions of higher education and their function to certify personnel.

For our discussion please think about the relationships among the organizations. Where are there major problems? What is your advice for change so that the system can better work together to improve Iowa education.

The study will include interviews of leaders who know Iowa education and who can offer insight into improving the
current system. After the completion of the study the findings and recommendations will be sent to you.

I look forward to our discussion. Our appointment is scheduled for (time) on (date) at the (location). Please contact me at 515-271-2088 with any questions.

Sincerely,

Cindy M. Yelick
This study will attempt to undertake a system view of education in the state of Iowa. Five organizational groups are responsible for education in the state. These organizations form a complex system which influences everything from policy formation to service delivery. The groups of organizations which compose the educational system in Iowa are depicted below.