Six Schools Take Stock

NELSON L. BOSSING

It may be of interest to schools concerned with making a more consistent and aggressive attack upon their problems to know that some local school boards are financing their own studies. They have undertaken to equip their schools with up-to-date professional libraries on curriculum. They have paid the expenses of the members of their staffs who have gone to the State University each month and for a week-long institute held yearly. Consultants' services have been furnished by the University and traveling expenses paid by the local school board.

Such a program as carried on by half a dozen Minnesota school systems is reported here by Nelson L. Bossing, professor of education at the University of Minnesota. As consultant to the participating groups, the author has worked closely with each school staff and, thus, is able to give a comprehensive picture of the undertaking both as a whole and as it is developing in each community.

Six school systems in Minnesota decided three years ago to undertake a long-term examination of the educational programs offered their communities, along with whatever curriculum adjustments the study revealed desirable. These schools are now launched upon the fourth year of the project. The writer has served as general consultant or leader of the study.

The schools have followed a general plan or procedural steps based upon the tested experiences of those systems which have made notable progress in curriculum improvement. Since the project assumed local responsibility for the details of the study the faculties of each school were organized for work. Each school set up a directive committee of from five to fifteen members, representative of the major divisions and interests of the schools. The number on the directive committees was determined roughly by the size of the school and its varied interest groups. One of the staff was chosen as the leader. With some variation to meet local situations the school faculties have met as a unit at least once a month. Sub-committees or sometimes the elementary and secondary divisions have had additional meetings to study more limited aspects of the general subject which the entire faculty has been considering. Approximately once a month forty to fifty representatives from these schools meet together to share experiences and discuss common problems. Since the University of Minnesota has been most centrally located, with the additional inducement of the Twin Cities for shopping and social activities, the meetings have been held at the University Saturday forenoons, often continuing into the early afternoon.

Four Years of Growth

The first year the schools undertook a study of the types of curriculum reorganizations which were taking place throughout the country. State, city, small town, and rural reorganization programs were studied. Individual teacher reports, group reports, panel discussions, occasional speakers, always followed by general faculty discussion, created interest and disseminated information. It was a general practice when reporting or discussing innovations underway elsewhere to raise the question of the applicability of such innovations to the local school situation. It might not be out of place to interpose here the observation that before the first year was over all schools had adopted the plan of a ten- or fifteen-minute social period at which time jaded spirits were refreshed at the end of a school day with sandwiches or cake and coffee before entering upon a serious discussion of curriculum problems. This served not only to "pep up" the staff but also to create an atmosphere of informality.

The second year the program was directed to a consideration of the reasons for this evident widespread concern about curriculum changes in the schools. The profound changes taking place in social development, transition...
from a rural agricultural to an urban industrial economy, technological developments affecting vocational and economic life, unprecedented growth in school population and its holding power, new developments in educational theory, and the psychology of learning, were among the topics studied as they might affect a school curriculum largely based upon historical antecedents now in question.

The third-year program envisaged each school formulating an acceptable social and educational philosophy for a vital educational program to meet the needs of a democratic society. Likewise the schedule called for the formulation of a statement of acceptable principles of a psychology of learning which the staffs of each school would use as the basis of further curriculum development. One or two schools achieved the program according to schedule but most of them found the formulation of an acceptable social and educational philosophy, even in reasonably broad outline, a full task for the year.

The fourth-year program as agreed upon sets up the goal of completing the unfinished business of last year, the acceptance of a working concept of the curriculum, formulation of general aims, scope and areas for the respective schools. As can be seen from the foregoing statements, the schools are beginning to diverge in their rate of progress. This is to be expected. There has not been the same continuity of leadership in each school or the same degree of effectiveness of the leadership given. Too, in some instances differences in rate of progress may be more apparent than real.

University Cooperation

Each summer, representatives of each school have met at the University the last of August for a week's institute. The primary purpose of this institute, which has varied from forty-five to sixty-odd in attendance, has been to take stock of achievements to date and to plan the overall and individual school next steps. The faculty of the University has been drawn upon to give the best technical aids to plan attacks upon specific phases of the problems faced by the schools. For example, in planning community surveys the department of rural sociology was called upon to meet with the group for several conferences. The same type of resources was drawn upon when plans were underway to make surveys of instructional practices and school building facilities. When the schools were considering the newer psychological developments as they influenced curricular changes, a specialist in that field from the University was invited to speak to the several faculties. This last year the University specialist in educational philosophy discussed that problem with each faculty group. As the program develops into more specific phases it is hoped the schools may be able to draw upon the resources of the nearby teachers colleges.

The programs as carried out by the separate schools while following an overall pattern have had wide variations in details. To describe some of these individual programs may be helpful. Each school determines its own organization and program. The final results will reflect the ingenuity and educational vision of each school community.

Student Participation Is Featured

One of the smaller schools began by selecting the high-school principal as the leader. After an initial meeting or two of the school staff with the writer, a dinner was prepared by the home economics department to which the faculty, school board, and some dozen or more influential members of the community were invited. The writer presented the scope of and need for the proposed project. The small school staff of this rural village community of some three hundred and fifty elementary and secondary students began with two meetings a month. Staff members reported on curriculum innovations gleaned from definite source material provided in a bibliography by the writer. The books were purchased by the school as part of its professional library.

Before the year was over the staff began to see many applications of the innovations in other schools to their problems. One of the first was the need to provide a more democratic educational situation within the school. Students were encouraged to discuss school problems as they saw them. Finally, key students were brought into the faculty meetings where reports of these types of innovations were discussed. As a result first steps were taken in the development of student participation in school government. The students were encouraged to study their own
needs and problems which were considered jointly by student leaders and the faculty. Now it is customary to have students in the regular faculty group when problems which may be immediately important to them are considered.

Community Shares in Study

The study led the faculty by the end of the first year to realize a sound educational program must be based upon an intimate knowledge of the home environment of each pupil. To this end class sponsors began a series of class entertainments to bring parents to school with their children. This was followed by a definite program of visitation designed to bring every teacher into the homes of each of his or her pupils. The revelations these contacts brought about, along with changed attitudes toward certain pupils and a sensing of curriculum changes to meet pupil needs, was a real thrill to the observer.

The development of an up-to-date cumulative record folder was begun as a means of providing new teachers with a maximum of information about new pupils.

It was decided near the close of the first year that both the Board of Education and the community should be brought into the study. Since that time, scarcely a meeting is held but that Board members and representatives of the community are present. This past year, for example, at one meeting two Board members, three ministers of the village, and some eight or ten women leaders in the community were present. When the staff began the study and formulation of a statement of social and educational philosophy, the leading women's organization of the village was invited to try its hand at such a statement. As is true in most such organizations a number of ex-teachers were members. The statement they drew up after long study and participation in faculty meetings on the problem proved to be a very thoughtful one. Definite changes in methods of instruction, materials used, the adoption of a new health program, closer contact with the pupils, additional building facilities and modifications of existing ones, better public relationship between the school and the community as well as a real professional spirit on the part of the school staff are some of the observable results of the curriculum study in this school to date.

December 1945

A Two-Pronged Study Results

A second school system in a semi-industrial community of approximately ten thousand and has had a somewhat different experience. Here a junior-high-school teacher who had taken courses in curriculum toward her Master's degree was selected as the faculty leader. The first year the panel method was used in the faculty study of curricular innovations. The program was carefully planned in advance with each panel preparing well its discussion before the large faculty group. As might be expected in a large staff of this kind, animated discussions developed between those of varied shades of educational background and belief. Ample reading materials were provided for the faculty. At the beginning of the study a dinner was given at which the Board of Education and leaders in the community joined the faculty. The writer, again, had been asked to present the project to enlist full community support.

Here the project moved somewhat obliquely the second year due to an opportunity which enabled the school to integrate its curriculum project with a practical community survey. The University of Minnesota undertook an extensive study of the effect of the war upon certain communities in the state. This particular community was chosen as the principal one for study. The writer with another colleague assumed responsibility for the study of the curriculum and instruction section of the survey. The local staff was immediately drawn into the survey as a part of the curriculum project. Much of the actual work was done by the school faculty. Thus a two-pronged study occupied the attention of the staff the second year—the community survey and the general project study of the reasons for an interest in the curriculum at this time.

It is more difficult to point out specific changes in the school as a result of the study to date. All agree a much better professional spirit pervades the whole school. A peculiar difficulty at first met with here and in every one of the schools in the project was that of a professional hesitancy on the part of teachers to speak before their colleagues. There was a definite sense of strangeness and self-consciousness between school faculties, particularly between the elementary and secondary school staffs. This has largely disappeared. They now think and feel as one
professional group. School problems are thought of as vital to all. As a result of the study to date, a better supervisory program has been set up with additional trained personnel to integrate the total school program. Individual teachers have been encouraged to undertake innovations and improvements in their work as has been true in all the six schools. Many changes have resulted.

Needs of Youth Are Met

In another of the cooperating schools the study of the first year resulted in a survey of the recreational facilities of the community for youth in and out of school. The cooperation of the leaders in the community was obtained. The results of the survey were broadcast through parents of the school and local community service organizations. As a result public-spirited groups in the community raised more than two thousand dollars to transform an unfinished and unused basement of the school into a teen age canteen and accepted definite responsibility for its maintenance. In the planning of the program for this teen age canteen, the youth of the school were given an important responsibility.

Because of the policy of regularly sharing experiences among the schools in the curriculum project, another school undertook a study of the summer needs of its youth. It was able to create sufficient interest in the village community to induce the village council to vote a summer recreation program with competent leadership under the authority of the school. This past year the village by charter amendment has made the summer recreation program a permanent feature financed out of the regular village budget but under the direct supervision and control of the school administration. Another interesting feature is that the school faculty of this community, as a by-product of its curriculum study a year ago, unanimously voted to make written and oral composition skills the responsibility of the entire faculty and not of the English department alone.

These are typical of the by-products of the work of the cooperating schools to date. No two schools are doing exactly the same things, though as pointed out in the beginning they are following a general overall pattern in their procedures. The major curriculum changes, we are confident, will take place in the next two years. Other teacher-training institutions, in addition to the University, no doubt would welcome the opportunity to cooperate with small groups of schools in such a project. Schools with members on their staffs who have had special training in curriculum should be able to set up an in-service program of this kind with little or no outside assistance.

Events in Cooperation

WALTER A. ANDERSON

MONTANA HAS COMPLETED during the past two years the first steps in a statewide program of high school curriculum planning. Cooperation of all interested groups has keynoted the project as teachers, school administrators, high school seniors, school board members, laymen, professional organizations, the State Department of Public Instruction, and the University of Montana have worked together. Their cooperative effort has resulted in the production of tentative guides for many high school subjects and in helpful curriculum bulletins which point the way to more effective education for Montana's high school youth. This brief article will present a series of events in cooperation with some analyses of their significance for curriculum improvement.

Professional Groups Pave the Way

Educational organizations had a great deal to do with the initiation of Montana's statewide high school curriculum program. The Northwest Society was organized in 1943 as a branch of the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development of the Na-

Educational Leadership