

Consider the Needs

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THE PROGRAM of curriculum improvement in Maine, now entering its third year, is an example of what may be done despite relatively serious limitations of money and staff, further complicated by wartime restrictions on travel and group meetings. The very limitations and obstacles seemed to stimulate ingenuity and flexibility in the personnel involved.

The merest beginnings of general policy and plan were developed in advance in order to get a program in motion. *First*, it was determined that the classrooms of individual teachers would be the place of beginning, rather than through a statement of policy and aim from a central committee. Aid to the teacher in improving whatever she was doing, in meeting whatever needs she recognized, was the initial principle. *Second*, the program was to be voluntary; no one was to be coerced or even strongly urged to participate. *Third*, the questions and needs submitted by teachers and superintendents would be met through aid to local study groups, regional conferences, bulletins, state and local workshops, or any other means which might need to be devised. These were not set up in advance but organized as need arose. The workshops in particular were asked for insistently by teachers early in the program.

Factors Leading to Curriculum Study

Varying interpretations are given to the course of study. The state course for elementary schools in Maine is a printed pamphlet of 229 pages organized under standard subject divisions. Far more than an outline of subject matter is presented; teaching aids, references, and a few illustrative lessons are well developed. A few reasonably modern units are indicated for primary grades. The aims, objectives, and discussions of learning and teaching are astonishingly modern despite the date, 1931.

Certain school systems have completely ignored the course, others followed it slavishly, still others made creative adaptations. Questions, mild criticisms, comparisons with other courses, suggestions, requests for aid were constantly heard.

Programs of teacher-education institutions stimulate thinking. The work at the normal schools and State University has always contained elements of advanced thinking. Certain rooms in the practice schools were well in advance of traditional formal practice. Emphasis on child growth was prominent in several courses. A questioning attitude was a natural result.

We believe readers will welcome the emphasis on process found in this account of the Maine program for improving the elementary curriculum. The author takes us, step by step, along the road followed by school people in Maine as they study critically their present curriculum, compare it with modern needs of children, and eventually emerge with changes and modifications. William H. Burton is professor of education at Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., and curriculum consultant for the Maine State Department of Education.



Courtesy Maine Department of Education

Teachers' needs come first

Outside contacts further stimulate interest. Many Maine school workers had contact with summer workshops and curriculum programs in various parts of the country. Questioning of traditional practice, together with requests for workshops at Maine institutions, was a natural result.

Lay interest begins to affect the program. Comments from parents, lay organizations, the general public, and the press, while random, have stimulated activity. Requests for interpretation, particularly dissatisfaction with the present pre-primary program, have helped bring about improvements.

A Program Emerges

A conference on the improvement of elementary education was held. The commissioner of education held a number of informal conversations with his staff, the normal school faculties, with many representative superintendents and teachers, and finally with the writer. An informal conference was called for May 12-13, 1943. Eight members of the state staff, ten representatives from the state normals, ten or twelve interested superintendents, one elementary supervisor, and the writer as outside observer attended. Teachers were invited but short notice and transportation difficulties prevented attendance. In subsequent efforts the teaching body has been in the forefront of the program.

Two decisions only were made in advance of the meeting. *First*, it was decided that a truly cooperative program was desired; the matter was to be dropped temporarily if there was not sufficient need and interest at this meeting. *Second*, it was determined that the teacher-educating institutions, the organizations of superintendents, and of teachers, would each be integral parts of any plan developed.

Three sessions, totaling eleven hours, were filled with spirited discussion. The procedure was wholly off the record and informal. Field workers, normal school staff members, and superintendents discussed their respective problems, responsibilities, strengths and weaknesses, and particularly inter-relationships with breath-taking frankness. Three areas emerged for attention:

- a. The course of study.
- b. The pre-service selection and training of teachers in the normal schools.
- c. The in-service improvement of teachers by the field agents (state supervisors) and by local superintendents.

Programs for all three are underway, but our concern here centers upon the first item. Three possible programs were discussed.

—supplement the present course with a continuing series of bulletins on special and acute problems now present, eventu-



Courtesy West Georgia College



USDA, photo by Madeleine Osborne

Good curriculums grow out of the needs of youth



Courtesy Long Beach (Calif.) Schools



Courtesy Glencoe (Ill.) Schools

Curriculum planning centers around local community and school needs

- ally covering all areas within the course.
- rewrite the present course with reasonable speed in the form of a series of sizable bulletins, one for each subject.
- embark upon a somewhat extensive program of construction for a new and modern course (actually a program of curriculum improvement but not yet so recognized).

The writer as consultant privately favored the third course, but when consulted suggested that the second might be desirable. Reasons were that Maine (a) has a large number of rural and very small village schools, (b) is a state of great distances which prohibit frequent meetings or conferences, (c) cannot possibly undertake a financially expensive program, and (d) is a distinctly conservative state. A modern program might be approached, it was indicated, through extensive improvement within the present framework. The group fully aware of what it was getting into turned this down (to the writer's pleasure) and demanded a thorough-going attack—let it lead where it might.

Two erroneous assumptions though tacit were apparent, and were allowed to pass for the moment. *First*, it was assumed that the State Department and the consultant would outline an organized scheme, select the personnel, and tell everyone what to do. *Second*, course of study writing was assumed to be equivalent to curriculum improvement. Cor-

rections for these assumptions developed naturally out of further experience.

Superintendents and teachers were asked for their views and suggestions. The superintendents' annual convention in August and the teachers' convention in October devoted more than one full day to discussion and conference on the emerging planning of the program. Questions, objections, arguments in favor, excellent suggestions appeared. It is not pretended that all concerned were in favor of an improvement program, but the great majority were ready to go to work. Subsequent conferences with individuals and small groups supplemented this beginning.

Normal school contribution and State University participation were examined. Conferences were held at the state institutions analyzing with each staff its own immediate problems in the area of teacher education. Distinctive contributions to the new state program of curriculum improvement were volunteered and solicited.

Experience Shapes Machinery for the Program

The general organization of state programs elsewhere was known to all groups, but no effort was made to set up a central council, committees on aim, scope and sequence, viewpoint, or production. The necessary committee and procedures were allowed to develop out of the program.

Local study groups were encouraged and assisted. Certain superintendents had been carrying on such study for some time. A program of furnishing bibliographies and materials in answer to local needs, of supplying the services of State Department specialists and of the general consultant was underway when cut off by wartime restrictions. This program is now being reinstated and greatly supplemented through the willingness of the State University and normal schools to participate in and give credit for local study and workshops.

A number of regional conferences were planned. These, like the study groups, were to be given only when requested and based on local needs and questions submitted well in advance. Two were held before travel restrictions interrupted the program. Others are now planned for the near future. The first included 115 teachers from public and parochial schools. The second, in which 7 adjoining districts participated, included 7 superintendents, 350 teachers, and about 25 laymen. Two conferences for superintendents were held in November 1945 at which 70 superintendents were aided with problems confronting them.

Meeting patterns were flexible. The consultant usually opened with a twenty- to thirty-minute analysis of certain major questions from the list submitted. An open forum or town meeting discussion followed. Afternoons were in one case continuation of general discussions, in another small group conferences. Summaries were made as needed when points of agreement requiring organization seemed to be reached. Items needing further analysis were also listed.

Questions submitted ran well into the hundreds, ranging from those on fundamental principles to those on specific details of daily programming. Teachers were advised that any question, no matter how simple or how complex, would receive attention as time permitted. Conferences this year will begin with those questions under analysis when the conferences were prohibited by ODT regulations.

Four workshops for elementary teachers have been held. Each was a joint project of the State Department, the University, the normal schools, the superintendents and teachers of the state. The first, in the summer of 1944, and the second in 1945 were

general and held at the University. An art workshop was operated as an integral part of these two. The third workshop in 1945 was held at the Farmington Normal School and was in direct answer to the increasing demand for background on child nature and development. It focused attention on the study and observation of children. The fourth workshop for rural teachers only was held at Fort Kent Training School in northern Maine.

Requests for enrollment in the general workshops were so heavy that allocation by districts had to be made. The first enrolled 172 of which 27 were superintendents; the second had 181 of which 10 were superintendents. The child study workshop included 27 teachers.

Staffs were drawn from state institutions and school systems with one or two from outside the state. A resource leader in music served each of the two general workshops, and during the first year a leader in physical education was available. A rural leader was added the second year. The child study workshop made use of several local staff members and outside resource leaders. Supervisors and teachers in Maine school systems will play an increasingly important role in staffing future workshops.

The first workshop was encouraged to work on any problem of any kind. The general aim was assistance to any teacher in improving anything she was doing. Many studied the improvement of reading, of arithmetic, of language arts. Others read for background on reading readiness, on functional arithmetic. Still others planned series of lessons. The majority attempted to outline a subject-matter unit or to project a possible experience unit. The latter activity was encouraged by the staff with the hope that demand for background in educational psychology and philosophy would emerge. This hope was amply justified by events throughout the state during the year. Thus emphasis on educational philosophy and psychology were brought in through request rather than introduced formally in the beginning. The special workshop on child study and the planning for the second general workshop were results of the constant requests for background. The impact of the first workshop upon the state was remarkable.

The second general workshop, while still

encouraging teachers to work upon any problem selected, did include an organized series of conferences on the nature and growth of children as the basis for modern curriculums. This was enthusiastically received.

The second workshop also included several groups of teachers who did initial work in committee on several bulletins in constant demand over the state. A bulletin for junior-primary teachers, one on assisting teachers to make the transition from traditional to modern teaching, and one on the special problems of the isolated rural school were started and will be completed by these committees during the year. Public relation problems were constantly before this group but did not crystallize into committee or bulletin work. The superintendents' conferences this winter will take this up as a major problem.

Several bulletins have been issued; others are projected. Students in the 1944 workshop asked, toward the close, that a summary bulletin be constructed to aid them and their superintendents in carrying on the new procedures during the year. Students and staff constructed on the spot a fourteen-page bulletin which was distributed by the state department. A second request was for sample units. Six representative papers by workshop students were selected from 150 submitted and incorporated in a ninety-five-page bulletin issued by the state department. A third production grew out of interest in the art workshop and was produced during the year by a committee of teachers guided by an art supervisor at one of the normal schools. Brief, illustrated, and lively in style, it introduced teachers to modern views on teaching art to young children.

Committees are now completing work on the previously mentioned bulletins. Other committees will undoubtedly arise in the near future to work out a general summary bulletin on the curriculum program, another on public relations, and probably one on the holding of group discussion meetings.

The Immediate Future

1. Earlier plans for local study groups, local workshops, and regional conferences will now go forward.

2. Two conferences especially for superintendents will be held immediately for discussion of problems of leadership and public relations.

3. Bulletins initiated in the 1945 workshop will be completed and others planned.

4. The State University and normal school staffs have suggested on their own initiative that extension courses be given dealing with community surveys, community problems, and the adjusting of the curriculum to the community. This was in part an original contribution by the institutions and in part stimulated by an interesting development in the 1944 workshop. Approximately twenty students or small groups produced units or subject-matter outlines based on local community problems and settings. The importance of the community had not been stressed, but the basic principle of intimate interaction between school and community appeared constantly in group conferences and discussions.

5. The University suggested and is considering with the normal schools a plan to relate local study groups and workshops to the extension course service with credit.

6. Local leadership dominant from the first is increasing.

7. The program will be extended in the not distant future to the secondary level.

8. The general program is expected to move, in answer to increasing request from the field, toward initiation of work upon a general viewpoint and framework for the first six grades and pre-primary. A limited scope and sequence will not be set up if present thinking continues. Effort will be made to develop a program based on the natural activities and the needs of children, within which individual teachers will develop, with their own groups, curriculums for individual schools.

MEMBERS WILL BE INTERESTED in knowing that the annual membership count in the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development is made as of December 31. This information is of particular importance to persons sending in membership renewal at this time of the year.

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