

Local Studies Lead to Curriculum Change

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Discovery of facts concerning local conditions leads to significant curriculum change, according to Professor Harold C. Hand, University of Illinois, Urbana.

TO ANY experienced curriculum worker it is well known that only as teachers, patrons and pupils change their practice can the curriculum possibly be improved. But the matter of *how* to induce these participants to change their practice is always of vital concern. The truth is, we know all too little about the techniques through which change is accomplished.

One approach that appears to be meeting with success in Illinois is that associated with utilization of the Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program's "basic studies" (local studies basic to curriculum development).

This approach is based on the assumption that theory alone is not enough to turn the trick. It is recognized by those involved in this program that theory—i.e., a "picture in the head" in regard to what the school should be and do—is vitally necessary if teachers, patrons and pupils are to be encouraged to change their practice. If there is to be any purposeful shooting there must be a target at which to shoot. But theory, by and of itself, seldom if ever leads to action—at least this is the belief in the Illinois program.

This seems to be true principally because the tendency to "wish think" is very strong in all of us. Because we feel something *ought* to be true of our school, we are almost irresistibly im-

pelled to believe that it *is* true. And when we believe that *what is* corresponds rather comfortably to *what ought to be*, we do not of course make any important changes in what we do.

To get us to change what we do, *local* facts must be dug up and put into the picture. Five actual examples are:

SCHOOL'S HOLDING POWER INCREASED

In common with their fellow teachers in all parts of the nation, staff members of a certain Illinois high school believed, and still believe, that the public secondary school should serve all the children of all the people.

The teachers in this high school knew that for the nation as a whole only about seven out of every ten youths ever attend high school, and that for Illinois as a whole only about eight out of every ten do so. They knew also that typically only about half of those who enter grade nine continue until graduation.

Their knowledge of these data made no real impression on these teachers; they certainly did not regard them as being presumptively true of their own school situation. Instead, they felt that the holding power of their school was very good; in other words, that *what was* corresponded rather comfortably to *what ought to be*. Consequently they could see little or no sense in even considering what might or ought to be

done to make their school more durably attractive to all youth.

The administration conducted the ISSCP Holding Power Study¹ (which is done by office clerks and the principal, not by teachers) and discovered that for every 100 youths who entered the ninth grade of this school, not quite half continued until graduation.

When the data from this local study were presented to the faculty, action resulted. The teachers' sense of *what ought to be* was outraged by *what was* actually found to be true. Vigorous and intelligent attempts to improve the curriculum of this school were begun almost immediately and are still continuing. Not all, but by far the greater number of teachers in this institution insisted that the situation be remedied.

HIDDEN TUITION COSTS STUDIED

Teachers in another Illinois high school believed, and still believe, that the economic condition of the family should bar no boy or girl from attending high school.

These teachers knew that the funded findings of a dozen or so studies of "hidden tuition costs" conducted in scattered communities throughout the United States revealed the personal per-pupil cost of attending the public high school was about \$125 per year; food, clothing, shelter and transportation excluded.

This figure was not taken at all seriously by teachers in this school. They quite definitely did not regard this "other fellows" finding as being pre-

sumptively true in their own situation. Instead, they estimated that it cost perhaps \$35 per pupil per year to attend their school. Given the economic level of the community, they were confident none of their pupils was in the least distressed by the hidden tuition charges of their school. Consequently they could see no sense in considering ways and means of making theirs a more nearly cost-free school.

The ISSCP Hidden Tuition Costs Study² was, at the insistence of the administration, conducted by this school. To the amazement of the staff, a price tag of over \$40 was found to appertain to one single course in the curriculum. The faculty's estimated per-pupil cost was but about a fourth of the most probable true figure for the average pupil.

Because they were unwilling to change their theory that the cost of attending should be within reach of all to fit the local facts as thus discovered, these teachers proceeded to do what they could to make the local facts fit their theory by reducing the costs in their school. This process still continues.

PARTICIPATION AFFECTED BY FAMILY INCOME

Most, if not all, teachers in another Illinois high school knew the principal generalizations from studies summarized in such books as Warner, Loeb and Havighurst's *Who Shall Be Educated?* These generalizations include the statement, that the less privileged school youth are "included out."

Only a few of these teachers and the

¹ Charles M. Allen; *How to Conduct the Holding Power Study*. ISSCP Bul. No. 3. Office of State Supt. of Public Instruction, Springfield, Ill.

² Harold C. Hand. *How to Conduct the Hidden Tuition Costs Study*. ISSCP Bul. No. 4. Office of State Supt. of Public Instruction, Springfield, Ill.

principal of the school felt that these findings might possibly be mildly presumptive in reference to the local situation; most thought it little short of preposterous to assume that any sort or degree of discrimination could possibly be operative in their school.

The ISSCP Participation in Extra-Class Activities Study³, which imposed no work on any teacher, was undertaken by this school. It was found the "dice were loaded" to the extent of at least four to one in favor of youngsters from the upper as compared to the lower income families.

This totally unexpected finding led the staff to immediate attempts to remedy the situation.

GUIDANCE STUDY CONDUCTED

Most of the staff members of another Illinois high school were of the comfortable opinion that the student body was reasonably well satisfied with teacher-pupil relationships, classroom procedures, etc.

This school was one of the nearly 100 institutions that conducted the ISSCP Guidance Study⁴ in 1947-48. Data yielded by one of the instruments utilized in this study revealed a disturbing amount of pupil dissatisfaction with the curriculum, teaching procedures, teacher-pupil relationships, and the like.

Such locally discovered facts about themselves these teachers took to heart. Under leadership of a faculty commit-

tee, efforts were soon under way both to remedy and to prevent major dissatisfactions thus revealed.

SCHOOLS MAKE FOLLOW-UP STUDY

Only the principal and a few members of the faculty of another Illinois high school recognized that any serious attempt to improve the curriculum was called for by the situation in their community. General belief was that the school was attempting to do about what it should be doing and about what the community expected it to do; and further, that the school was meeting these expectations with more than a reasonable degree of success.

This school was one of 90 that set out to do the ISSCP Follow-Up Study⁵ in 1948-49. This study includes a sampling of recent graduates in order to discover what real-life problems these young adults have encountered or are encountering. Underlying the study is the presumption that the school should attempt to make its students at least reasonably "literate" in reference to such problems. Patrons (parents and non-parents), teachers and pupils are asked to indicate whether or not they feel the high school should deal with these problems. Another sampling of recent graduates is requested to indicate how much of the help they needed in reference to each of these real-life problems their high school had given them. All teachers are asked also to estimate how much of the help they felt was needed in reference to each such real-life problem was typically received by members of the last graduating class.

³ Harold C. Hand, *How to Conduct the Participation in Extra-Class Activities Study*. ISSCP Bul. No. 5, Office of State Supt. of Public Instruction, Springfield, Ill.

⁴ Harry D. Lovell, *How to Conduct the Study of the Guidance Services of the School*. ISSCP Bul. No. 6, Office of State Supt. of Public Instruction, Springfield, Ill.

⁵ Kenneth B. Henderson, *How to Conduct the Follow-Up Study*. (Available about Dec. 1950) Office of State Supt. of Public Instruction, Springfield, Ill.

When the findings of this study were brought together and presented to the faculty, the complacency of the staff members all but disappeared. A strong majority of the patrons, it was found, felt the school should be giving help with the real-life problems around which the study centered. Only in reference to about a third of these problems did any very substantial proportion of either recent graduates or teachers estimate that adequate help had been given by the school. Clearly there was a very considerable amount of "unfinished business" which had to be assigned high priority if the reasonable expectations of the community were to be satisfied. This school is now one of the most ac-

tive in the ISSCP and is definitely embarked upon a significant program of curriculum improvement.

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These examples, each of which with but minor variations could be duplicated again and again by reference to other high school situations, seem to demonstrate the usefulness if not the necessity of utilizing the local study approach⁶ as an instrumentality in the engineering of curriculum development.

⁶ Harold C. Hand, *How the ISSCP Basic Studies Can Help You Improve Your High School*. (In press, probably available this month.) Office of State Supt. of Public Instruction, Springfield, Ill.

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