

# *Down East Experiences in Curriculum Change*

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During the past eight years the schools of Maine have benefited from the state-wide curriculum program which is described in this article by Harland A. Ladd, Commissioner of Education, Augusta.

AN important educational program in the State of Maine today is encouraging and directing progress toward better curriculum practices and hence toward better educational opportunities for children of this and later generations. It may be well to review the steps which brought this program into being.

In 1943 Maine found that the vitality of its schools had become seriously impaired. For two years a week-to-week decline in school efficiency had occurred as teacher supply was drained off by the armed services, by other states and by industry. Qualified replacements were not available, for teachers' college enrollments, too, had declined sharply. School superintendents searched in vain for competent personnel to fill vacancies. Housewives with former training and experience, and even high school graduates without benefit of professional study, were drafted in order to keep school doors open. Children, our most important resource, were being exploited as a result of the serious dislocation in our social order. The drastic conditions required vigorous therapy.

Commissioner Harry V. Gilson called a conference of the educational staff of the State Department of Education, the faculty of the state teachers' colleges, and representatives of the professional

organizations of the state. A professional consultant also was engaged.<sup>1</sup>

During several planning sessions this group attempted to put into focus the educational fabric of Maine as it existed. From the pattern which emerged, and from observation of experiences of similar groups in other states, it tried to evolve and implement a frontal attack upon disintegrative forces and to energize new and constructive efforts at improving the educational situation.

## **'Do-Democracy' Emphasized**

Now, after eight years, Maine is still engaged in a curriculum program designed to deal with "grass roots" problems of teachers. Consideration of individual problems, provision for many types of participation by and interaction among teachers, superintendents, supervisors and lay persons, and establishment of democratic relationships have been among the bases on which the program was founded.

The last of these aims should be emphasized. We recognized early that the new school must incorporate "do-democracy" throughout its organization and relationships if real values in child

<sup>1</sup> William H. Burton, Director of Apprenticeship, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University.

growth were to be realized. We agreed that over the years we had talked rather glibly about teaching democracy, but that in large measure we had failed miserably in the *practice* of its principles and concepts. The living forces which we were attempting to liberate could function only in a "do-democracy" environment. This has been and continues to be fundamental in the curriculum effort.

#### WORKSHOPS PROVIDE IN-SERVICE GROWTH

In the beginning it was determined that the first and most direct approach to better education should be through the in-service growth of teachers. In the words of the consultant, "improving the work of classroom teachers in doing whatever they are now doing" should be a basic and continuing goal of leadership.

Initial approach to in-service training of teachers in Maine was through a three-weeks' summer workshop for elementary teachers at the university. The success and impact of this and subsequent workshops surpassed all expectations. Sponsored for the first few years by the State Department of Education, with certain costs of participants paid by the state, it enjoyed not only large enrollments but also hearty approval of the hundreds of teachers who attended. Its influence has been widespread.

The workshop was, for many, a first experience with directed guidance in solution of problems peculiar to their own classroom situations. For many, too, it was a first experience in personal non-status relationship with state and national consultants in education, with outstanding leaders from great universi-

ties and colleges, and with key personalities in their own state. Perhaps for the first time in Maine, many participants were encouraged to make contributions from their experiences, to share these experiences with others, to meet consultants as a service group working side by side with them, and to feel the pulls of a great educational effort, broad in scope, philosophy and participation.

No program of education could be signally successful without the understanding, approval and active support of superintendents of schools. They, too, took part in a curriculum workshop with the consultant and with members of the staff of the state curriculum division. They studied developments in other sections of the country. They heard lectures. They held free and frank discussion of philosophies, objectives, and the findings of research. They considered problems of transition from the subject-centered curriculum to one in which growth and development of the individual child is of first concern.

This workshop and subsequent conferences may have been the most significant activity in the total program. Without the knowledge and resourceful leadership of this strategic group, the forward steps which were contemplated would have been difficult if not impossible. Once this group had given its acceptance and approbation, it provided a source of energy which has been an important reservoir in the release of human potentials.

#### Changes Through Cooperative Effort

Summer study alone could not produce the contemplated transition with any degree of rapidity. Continuing ef-

fort throughout the school year was necessary if large numbers of the total staff were to become familiar with the program and introduce even rudiments of it into classroom practices. Participation during the school year was made possible through leadership of superintendents of schools. Teacher groups, concerned with common problems, were encouraged to become committees to study the question and to propose and carry out steps toward its solution.

When teachers felt lack of background in a given area, the state university and the teachers' colleges were ready to work with them. Wholehearted cooperation of these institutions has added greatly to the developments thus far. Superintendents, too, made good use of the elementary supervisors on the state staff—four in number. As the in-service training program has evolved, teachers have come to take the lead in requesting supervisory assistance. Local workshops, often a week in length, and short work conferences directed toward particular problems have become commonplace.

#### PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING SOUGHT

Public understanding has been encouraged. The State Department of Education, superintendents of schools, and teachers have utilized many and varied methods in acquainting parents and other citizens with the purpose, nature and scope of the curriculum effort. Regional school committee meetings sponsored by the State Department of Education have played a significant part in keeping the program close to the citizens.

Willingness of the people to support a sound program for better education

was evidenced by enactment of a law which provided that teaching certificates be renewed during each five-year period, and established six hours of professional credit as a prerequisite for re-validation. Not only did the legislature pass the law, but it acted to implement it by adopting a provision whereby towns which assist teachers with costs of in-service study, by a minimum of \$50, will be reimbursed by this amount at the next distribution of state funds. In actual practice, the Commissioner has urged towns to supplement this basic sum through salary schedules or by other defined policies, so that the government will finance essential costs and the teacher will contribute time only.

#### Staff Engages in Study

Since this provision was written into the statutes four years ago, more than one-third of the professional teaching staff of the state have engaged in formal study during each year. It should be noted, too, that members of the State Department of Education have realized that if they are to give quality leadership, they should be increasingly better prepared. Without exception, members of the curriculum division have been doing advanced work in several of the leading universities and colleges of the East.

Materials prepared during the first elementary workshop at the University of Maine were recognized as valuable to teachers who were honestly seeking to improve classroom experiences for children. Screened and edited by committees of teachers, the contributions were published and distributed by the State Department of Education.

## Resource Materials Produced

Moreover, a program for developing other resource materials was initiated. It was determined that this work should be done *by Maine teachers for Maine teachers*. Superintendents were asked to nominate from their staffs individuals who might make contributions and enjoy personal growth as well, through work on committees for preparation of these basic aids. Local communities have furnished substitutes for these teachers for several days during each school year, and they have assembled in small groups at the state department for study and discussion leading to the ultimate publication of several curriculum guides. The state paid the expenses of these assistants, who became in effect temporary members of the curriculum division.

The several bulletins<sup>2</sup> published sought first to establish a point of view emphasizing child development, and second, to give specific suggestions for improving teaching. Those who participated in the study and writing shared their experiences with teachers in their own schools and assisted in presenting the new bulletins to professional groups in their respective localities.

These guides served as aids for many teachers and precipitated unexpected requests for direct and specific assistance in subject areas. Presently, teacher committees are working with these problems and are preparing additional guides. These committees, aiming to keep the philosophy of previous bulletins, soon realized that content

<sup>2</sup> *Our Little Folks. School Days. A Forward Step. The Good School.* ..

emphasis was far from ideal in school curriculums. Nevertheless a flexible treatment of content seems important in keeping close to the "grass roots" experiences and needs of teachers if everyone is to find help in moving forward.

First sections of these aids in arithmetic, language arts and social studies have been published for use by Maine teachers. Additional sections are in process at the present time. Materials are being produced in loose-leaf, sectional form, which serves to make them available to teachers as rapidly as possible on the one hand, and on the other, permits continuing attention to needs as they appear.

## Some Individuals Resist

The practical effect of these documentary aids of all types has been both encouraging and discouraging. As might be anticipated, only those teachers with real interest have taken time to study the material and to re-adjust their teaching practices in terms of the elements which they might accept.

Also as might be anticipated, transitions have been resisted by individuals and groups for many and varied reasons. There are always those persons who cannot accept change except when they have "seen for themselves." Feelings of insecurity often have a tendency to forbid experimentation. For these reasons we have concluded that there is need for more personal interaction and actual demonstration. A new front in the activity has just been opened this fall.

Since the beginning of the curriculum revision program, the four elementary supervisors have been available for

service when requested by a local administrator. Major emphasis of their work has been on classroom visitation and teacher and group conferences on identified problems. Because a brief discussion of a problem is seldom adequate to enable a teacher, while carrying a heavy teaching load, to make steady progress toward its solution, an experiment is being conducted to determine whether intensive work in a given community might be more productive than diversified, brief contacts in many schools. Fortified by direct observations in the field, we are convinced that there remains the major task of amalgamating principle and practice in a number of schools which may become centers for group observation and exchange.

It is to be hoped that these supervisors can work with a small number of teachers periodically throughout the year, and with them build a philosophy and practice which can be observed, evaluated and shared by other teachers in the area. We hope to demonstrate that good teachers working under ordinary conditions can do group teaching, can have pupil-teacher planning, can have individual guidance, self-evaluation and many other aspects of a strong learning situation.

The scope of this article will not permit further elaboration on this or other phases of the pattern of progress which is unfolding in Maine. It should be recorded, however, that developments in secondary education similar to those heretofore described have produced equally significant results.

#### Evidences of Improvement Seen

The foregoing review is not intended to leave the reader with a feeling that

the objectives of our curriculum development program have been achieved in full or in major part. Such is not the case. The road still winds ahead—long, uncertain in some spots, perilous in others. It is gratifying, however, to those of us who have been associated closely with the undertaking to know that we are "on the march."

Evidences of improvement can be found in hundreds of classrooms. Boys and girls today by the thousands are enjoying better educational opportunities because people, both within and outside the teaching profession, had the vigor, foresight and honesty to see the schools in decline and to do what was necessary to check that course, redirect it and bring something broader, better and finer into the growth and development of tomorrow's citizens.

From the beginning the teachers of Maine have demonstrated their desire to provide good education for the children for whom they have *in loco parentis* responsibility. When suggested changes have been in advance of experiences and understanding, their validity has been challenged. Often differences have been largely a question of semantics, and as wide participation and interaction have been promoted there has been a corresponding increase in requests for assistance. To many teachers the change from a regimented program to one of creativeness and vision has been a freeing and releasing experience. Generally teachers show a living purpose in their professional lives—to recognize youth's problems, interests and potentials today in order that their tomorrow may be one of competence, happiness and security growing out of "The Good School."

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