

The Role of Laymen in Curriculum Planning

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What are best ways of channeling public interest in schools toward achievement of the ultimate objective—a continuously improving school program? Some answers to this question are suggested by Helen F. Storen, assistant professor of education, Queens College, New York City.

WHEN THE HISTORY of American education in the twentieth century is written, one of the significant developments to be recorded will surely be the resurgence of lay interest in the public schools. The extent of citizen participation in school affairs during the past few years exceeds that of any period since colonial times. This trend is encouraging, for unless the school program meets the needs and wishes of the community, public education cannot be defended. Although lay participation is difficult to arrange in a complex urbanized society, both educators and laymen now seem to be convinced of its value and are making earnest efforts to achieve it. Even the recent attacks upon the schools have tended to be a blessing in disguise for although in many cases they have been spearheaded by dubious pressure groups, they have aroused the interest of the wider public who have genuine concern for education. The problem now becomes one of devising the best ways of channeling this interest and enthusiasm toward the ultimate objective—a continuously improving school program.

Since lay participation is a comparatively new phenomenon in our times,

local communities have had no pattern to follow and the experimental efforts that have been made are sketchy and varied. It will take additional years to carefully evaluate these activities, but perhaps we should at least begin to examine them in terms of the values we hold, and try to see if we believe they are going in the right direction.

This article deals with the part laymen can and should play in curriculum development. Before discussing the functions that might be performed by laymen we need to look briefly at the kinds of committees or councils that are dealing with problems of the curriculum.

CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMITTEES

An examination of the literature and of the few research studies that have been made indicate that the most prevalent pattern of school community participation is the "Citizens' Advisory Committee" which is described elsewhere in this issue. These groups have been most effective in securing additional financial aid, and in improving school services as well as in acting as "counter-attackers" when unfair charges have been made against the

schools. Are these committees, however, as presently constituted, the best way of organizing lay-professional cooperation for *curriculum planning*? Is there danger that once a citizens' advisory committee is formed it will be *the* agency, the *one* channel of communication between the public and schools?

According to studies quoted in a recent publication of the American Association of School Administrators these committees are made up of 80 to 90 per cent laymen and 10 to 20 per cent professionals.¹ The chairman is usually a layman and in many committees voting is restricted to the non-professionals. These committees are advisory only, and when they deal with curriculum problems their suggestions are usually forwarded to the professional curriculum committee. In respect to efficiency this procedure is surely time consuming. If professionals (and frequently they are administrators, not teachers) have only token representation on the committees, much of the discussion relative to curriculum may be theoretical. Teachers need to be present in order to help laymen interpret the present program, see the problems involved, and point out possible solutions. One citizens' advisory committee spent two years discussing a certain aspect of the high school curriculum. Its suggestions were then forwarded to the school staff committee which spent an additional year working on the plan. Wouldn't time have been saved, and a more mutually acceptable plan evolved, if the committee had been a *joint* one from the start?

¹ *Lay Advisory Committees*. American Association of School Administrators, 1951, Washington, D. C.

Another lay committee was convinced that the total school program needed overhauling. They invited prominent educators to address their group on "newer trends in education." Teachers were also invited but few came since they had no share in planning the meetings or selecting the speakers. Some teachers resented the severe criticism of the present program by several members of the lay committee whom they felt were not adequately informed about the local school situations. The leaders of the committee picked up enough information to become crusaders for the "new education" and consequently made suggestions to the Board of Education for immediate curriculum changes. They did not realize that many of the traditional teachers in the school were not willing or able to make the necessary adjustments, and that the teachers who wanted curriculum revision felt that the changes should be made slowly and gradually. These two cases are extreme and exceptional, but they point a lesson. Other communities have come to realize that, whereas a lay-dominated committee may be a good medium for dealing with problems of taxation, it may have decided disadvantages in dealing with matters of curriculum. Consequently they have organized other types of committees to deal with curriculum.

In response to a questionnaire sent to thirty schoolmen who have been involved in lay-professional curriculum planning, all agreed that teachers should constitute at least half of the members of any committee concerned with curriculum. The majority also believed that there should be not just *one* permanent lay committee working

on curriculum problems but that there should be many small, "ad hoc," informal committees composed of teachers and laymen—if possible organized on a neighborhood basis.

CURRICULUM COUNCILS

For the purpose of dealing with over-all curriculum problems a committee organized by the school staff is most effective. Usually such committees are chaired by the curriculum director, an administrator, or teacher. The membership is composed of teachers from all levels and areas of the schools and laymen who may represent community groups. Students and alumni are also represented on some councils. The Kalamazoo council is typical of this kind of plan (see diagram, Figure 1). According to Theral T. Herrick, director of curriculum, this council "acts as a clearing house or motivating group for curriculum change. It is not a production group." Production work for curriculum improvement is done by special committees. These committees, depending on the particular function to be performed, may or may not include laymen. If it is a committee working on a problem that is of major concern to laymen, they are included. Tenafly, New Jersey, has a similar arrangement for lay participation. The over-all council decides upon the particular areas for study and small committees of teachers and laymen carry on the work.

WHO DOES WHAT?

After deciding upon arrangements by which laymen may participate in curriculum planning and after determining the best distribution of membership for committees, the question arises as to the

roles that should be played by the professionals and by the laymen. Results of the questionnaire cited above indicated that laymen can share effectively in: (a) determining the goals of the school; (b) planning the framework of the curriculum (deciding upon the major experiences or courses to be included); and (c) evaluating the program.

Only half the persons answering the questionnaire felt that laymen should help in planning the content for a particular grade or course. Not one believed that laymen should help teachers decide upon specific methods of teaching.

Developing Goals

Every so often most school systems decide that they need to re-examine or clarify their objectives. At this point the help of laymen is imperative if schools are to discharge their obligations to the community. Certain policies also must be decided upon at this time.

If one of the goals is the creation of astute citizens, then students must have experiences which will enable them to make judgments in political life. An obvious implication is that students be permitted to study controversial issues, but in certain communities there has been vigorous opposition to social studies courses which have included a study of current problems. However, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, a committee composed of laymen and teachers worked out a policy regarding the teaching of controversial issues and the selection of materials to be used in the classroom and library which was satisfactory to all. *This* is surely an area in which laymen can play a vital role.

DIAGRAM OF THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CURRICULUM COUNCIL AND ITS COMMITTEES

The major purpose of the Curriculum Council is to understand and improve our educational program.

<i>Curricular Committees</i>	<i>Curriculum Council</i>	<i>Curricular Committees</i>
I. Public Relations Committee	1 representative elected by each school or a combination of small schools	XII. Intercultural Workshop
II. All-School Reading Committee	1 representative elected by the specialized subject matter areas of music, art, physical education, industrial arts, and home economics (a few representatives represent both these areas and schools)	XIII. Unified Studies Committee
III. General Education Committee	1 representative elected by the senior high school subject matter departments (social studies, language arts, science, mathematics and business education)	XIV. All-School Audio-Visual Education Committee
IV. Special Education Committee	4 administrative staff members	XV. Child Growth and Development Committee
V. All-School Social Studies Committee	1 representative elected by the supervisors	XVI. Professional Growth Committee
VI. Junior High School Curriculum Committee	1 representative elected by the principals	XVII. Central High School Curriculum Evaluation Committee
VII. Citizenship Education Committee	20 representatives of the P.T.A.	XVIII. Industrial Arts Committee
VIII. Mathematics Committee	1 representative elected by special education	XIX. Home Economics Committee
IX. Social Travel Committee	2 student representatives elected by the senior high school government	XX. Art Committee
X. Science Committee	1 representative elected by the Kalamazoo Federation of Labor	XXI. Music Committee
XI. Primary Unit Committee	1 representative elected by the Junior Chamber of Commerce	XXII. Physical Education and Health Committee
	1 representative elected by the Social Agencies	
	2 recent high school graduates (1 vocational worker, 1 college student)	
	1 representative elected by the Department of Research and Guidance	
	1 representative elected by the Parent Education Council	
	22 chairmen of curriculum committees	
	4 representatives of the A.A.U.W.	
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Figure 1. The Kalamazoo Curriculum Council acts as a clearing house for curriculum change.

Planning Curriculum Experiences

Seldom is there an opportunity to start from scratch in planning a curriculum. Changes, for obvious reasons, must be made in piecemeal fashion. Today in the elementary schools there is considerable agreement among educators and community adults as to an over-all curriculum pattern. Most people believe that a balanced elementary program includes social learnings, basic skills, health education and aesthetic experiences. Continuous work goes on, however, in selecting the major activities for each area, and laymen can share in this process.

In Glencoe, Illinois, small neighborhood groups were organized to plan revisions in the elementary programs. In Northbrook, Illinois, pre-school workshops are held for staff and community adults and a different aspect of the school program is considered each year. Suggestions are made at the workshop and carried out during the year by committees of teachers and parents.

The development of a more suitable high school curriculum is the greatest educational challenge of the century, and it is important that the creative effort of *all concerned* be put to work on the problem. The high school pattern is so crystallized that even any attempt to bend the framework meets with considerable opposition. In several cities where a "core program" has been introduced there has been immediate criticism. This may be due to failure of the schools to properly inform the community of the purposes and practices of the program. In some school systems, however, the criticism may

have been justified in that the staff was coerced into making changes for which they were not prepared and the results were far from satisfactory. Core programs and other changes in the high school program have been successful only where staff and laymen together have critically examined their present curriculum in terms of the needs of high school youth, and have become convinced that new patterns and new content were needed. Because the core curriculum deals with personal and social relationships it should be of great interest to parents, and it should be one in which they can make a valuable contribution. Most laymen are willing to leave the planning of special subjects to the teacher. Few laymen ask to help plan a course in trigonometry or foreign language.

The organizing of the day-by-day sequence of experiences for any grade or course can best be accomplished by the teacher and his students. Laymen can be used, however, in helping collect resource material; and individuals with specific talents or skills can be called in as consultants.² In planning community study on any grade level adults can be helpful in a variety of ways.

Decisions should also be left to the professionals regarding methods of teaching although parents are entitled to know why new methods are being used. In schools where visitors are welcomed and parent-teacher conferences are held regularly there is little objection to innovation in method.

²For other ways in which laymen have participated in specific aspects of curriculum planning see *Laymen Help Plan The Curriculum*, Helen F. Storen. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, Washington, D. C. 1946.

Evaluating the Program

Laymen should share in evaluating the school program, according to all of the educators responding to the questionnaire. An especially appointed lay committee with the assistance of the staff spent two years evaluating the school program at Eugene, Oregon, and has just issued an excellent report.³ Evaluation should be a joint endeavor with professionals appraising the more technical aspects of the curriculum. Most current evaluation surveys deal with the achievements of children at particular ages and grade levels. A much more significant survey would be an evaluation in terms of behavioral goals which would include not only an evaluation of the children in school but of the graduates. The total community could participate in such a project. Why not find out how many of the public school graduates vote? How many participate in other civic activities? What books do these graduates read? What do they do with their leisure time? Community life could also be appraised. What improvements have been made in health, welfare, recreation? Although the school is by no means the only influential factor in developing citizenship, we do claim that education for democratic living is one of our major goals. If the quality of community living is not being improved as a result of the emphasis placed on social living in the school program then we as educators should quit making extravagant claims.

³ *Report of Lay Advisory Committee on the Curriculum*. Board of Directors, School District No. 4, 275 Seventh Avenue, Eugene, Oregon.

SUMMARY

The experiences of a selected group of school people who have worked with cooperative planning groups during the past ten years have led them to the following tentative conclusions regarding the role of laymen.

- Laymen should be included in developing objectives and setting up the scope of the program.
- Laymen can contribute most effectively in planning those particular aspects of the curriculum that are concerned with the development of personal social values and behaviors.
- Laymen should always be included in planning when major changes in the curriculum are contemplated.
- Laymen should be brought into planning when any major controversy arises regarding the curriculum.
- The selection of the daily experiences, the planning of sequences, and the selection of methods to be used should be left to the teacher—to develop with her class in terms of their particular needs, interests and abilities.
- Laymen may be helpful in collecting resource material for specific units.
- Individuals who are expert in a particular field should be used in any way that would help enrich the program.
- Laymen can share in the preparation of curriculum materials, but the major direction for this work should be in the hands of the staff.

Experimentation with new ways of providing for community participation should be continued, but the important thing is that the community continue to participate.

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