

A High School Staff Examines Its Program

MILDRED A. AMEND

Facing a move and a major program adjustment, this high school staff learned much regarding the needs and the potentialities of its students.

THERE were a number of reasons why we needed to look at the curriculum in our high school. Two changes were imminent. We were to move into a new building and would change from a four-year to a three-year high school. Usually a new building means expanded facilities, but in our case many activities would for a time have to be curtailed. The building was to be built in sections, and for at least two years we would have to operate without a gymnasium, cafeteria or auditorium. So both these changes meant curriculum problems. A quick look at our program at the beginning of the year led our staff to believe that some changes would be desirable.

Some factors were present in our situation that made the staff feel optimistic about starting curriculum-study planning. Our administrators were ready to look critically at the program. They were anxious to work with us on an equal basis and indeed had asked us to attempt the job. Our principal, newly appointed, sincerely believed that basic curriculum planning is a responsibility of the entire faculty. We had several teachers who had had no previous experience—but who

wanted to know as much as possible about a high school program. Many of the older teachers were willing to consider change. There was considerable leadership ability in the group so that the whole responsibility would not fall on the principal. We had administrative assurance that any changes we considered desirable would be carried out. Professional help was available outside of our own staff. The curriculum consultant from our County Office met with us regularly and provided much of the behind-the-scenes leadership that we needed. Specialists from our State Department of Education were interested and anxious to help wherever possible. Community people were showing interest in the school and its offerings. Our school lay advisory council asked if one of its members might sit with our group.

So we were ready to work. How did we go about our job? In the first place, the decision to undertake such a curriculum study was made by the whole staff. There was a feeling that each teacher needed and wanted to know what other teachers were doing so that the program might become better integrated. While the entire faculty was committed to the study, we found that a smaller group could work more effectively. Twelve volunteered and chose

Mrs. Mildred A. Amend is librarian in the Kent-Meridian Senior High School, Kent, Washington.

their chairman. Other members were called in when needed. Meetings were informal, and any staff member could feel free to come in to a meeting at any time.

What Are the Needs?

We looked first at the framework within which we had to operate. We have certain state requirements which all high schools have to meet. Our colleges make certain course requirements for entrance. We must maintain certain standards to remain accredited.

Next we talked over what we thought curriculum planning meant, and why such planning is necessary. We asked ourselves the following questions and referred to them each time a change was contemplated:

1. What experiences should high schools offer that prepare children for adulthood?

2. What background of experience should schools provide a child by the time he graduates?

3. What knowledge, experience and skills will a graduate of our high school need? Which of these can we provide?

4. How can the students' interests be discovered, and how should these influence curriculum planning?

5. What does society expect from our schools?

We surveyed the graduates of the past several years to see what they did after leaving high school. A small percentage went on to college, many girls and some boys were married and became homemakers, many boys entered the military service, and some went to work on farms and in industry. Some girls went directly into office work and similar occupations.

What, we asked ourselves, does this mean to our curriculum planning? What experiences do all students need? How can the school prepare for home-making, farming, college, industry?

Departmental meetings were held so that small groups could evaluate a particular segment of the program. These reports were brought back to the core committee and studied, one by one. The committee made recommendations for change only after a thorough study and check-backs to our questions concerning curriculum planning. If the change contemplated was a new course, we asked ourselves:

1. Does it provide what other courses have failed to provide?

2. Can this particular need be met somewhere else in the student's high school experience?

3. Does it further the following objectives of education: self-realization, civic responsibility, economic efficiency and human relationships?

Finally, if the change was made, we understood that it was temporary and that further evaluation would be necessary.

Students Consulted

We interviewed students frequently for their reactions. Various staff members talked to parents to find out their expectations. We talked to Parent Teacher Association members and to teachers outside our district. Our consultants, who had wide experience, were especially helpful at this point. We examined courses of study of schools of comparable size and some what similar situations.

Thus we set up a program for the first year in our new building. We

looked at it carefully all year. We watched for students' reactions. When we were convinced that something was outside their interests and needs, changes again were made. For example, we found that two science courses were taught mainly for college preparatory work. Since only a few of our students go on to college, it seemed sensible to provide science experiences that would more nearly meet the needs of a large number of students. We also found that our students needed more experience in practical English, so broader offerings were made there. Before registration of students for the next year, we decided to evaluate again what we had and to look at what we wanted. We also wanted to test our findings with lay citizens in our community and with our outside consultants. We had a dinner meeting with our entire faculty, school board members, principals of the elementary and junior high schools, representatives of the lay advisory council, PTA members, and county and state curriculum people. Informally, we talked about our problems and listened to suggestions from those outside our working group. With all the data we could secure, we revised our program somewhat. In areas where facilities were not available, we tried to meet our students' needs in other ways. We had to compensate for the lack of a gymnasium by having directed outside play during study halls whenever the weather permitted. Activity-type classes, such as music, art, speech and debate, were increased in number wherever possible. Each student included at least one such class in his schedule—two, if possible.

Other Opportunities

As we kept watching our program in operation that first year, we began to look very carefully at our extra-curricular activity program. We soon discovered that we could not think of these as apart from the curriculum since they supplied opportunities for student growth in so many different ways. This led us to an evaluation of our whole activity program. A questionnaire was distributed to each student to give us an idea of student participation in the extracurricular program. Different clubs and groups were asked to look at their own programs and report to us on their strengths and weaknesses as they saw them. When we discovered some overlapping in functions and some groups without any recognized program, we encouraged the students themselves to remedy these situations. Thus we began to think of these activities in terms of co-curricular rather than extra.

After three years, our committee is still functioning. We feel that we have a balanced three-year program for our students. We know that there is better integration of department offerings. We have an idea that we are more keenly aware of our students' interests and desires than we were before. And aside from an improved school program, we have some other important results. Our staff as a whole has gained skills in staff planning; we can work together as a group; we can recognize leadership within our group; we have gained common interests in participation in this work.

As new facilities are added to our

plant, more staff planning is needed. Later this year a new gymnasium will be opened; a new wing for home economics will be ready; we will have an auditorium big enough to accommodate our whole student body. We need student help on the problems that arise—community help, too. But because our efforts have been recognized and our ideas tried, we are enthusiastic

about solving our new problems. We know that we can work together; we believe that we do know where we are going; we believe that planning by the whole staff is basic to good school administration. We expect to review and revise our planning constantly. We know that we don't have all the answers, but we are willing, as a group, to keep trying to find answers.

Do They All Have To Agree?

JOHN HENRY MARTIN

How can curriculum improvement committees arrive at a sound operational basis that will encourage the frank expression and consideration of fundamental differences in point of view? This author suggests that such basic differences may well serve to enrich the final decisions made by such committees.

PROGRAMS of curriculum change frequently have been semireligious rituals designed to make new converts to a predetermined plan. When we learn, however, to understand better the human factors in social change, and also learn to use the newer processes of group problem solving, we shall cherish the initial disagreements among a staff as factors to be dealt with rather than as antagonisms to be sublimated, converted or squelched. But because we have not yet learned this, we have sought agreement artfully, subtly or compulsively, and we have tended to quiet disagreement at the cost of dismissing factors vital to the successful operation of a curriculum proposal. Accordingly, when a still small voice has asked, "What are we going to do about punctuation in the core curricu-

lum?" we have tended to view such an inquiry as an anchor on progress rather than as a legitimate sub-problem to be taken into consideration as the curriculum planning proceeded. The atmosphere engendered by this kind of curriculum change will stifle vocal differences, but such repression will eventually explode like a corked and shaken bottle of soda-pop.

Curriculum committees and curriculum experts need to understand the bases from which differences of opinion stem. The need for this understanding is not sentimental but highly functional; for the differences of opinion are both symptom and statement of the real problems which a staff identifies as parts of the process of curriculum change. What are some of these sources of disagreement?

Copyright © 1954 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.