



Don't Forget the Students!

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Student participation in curriculum improvement, long advocated in frontier theory, is being put into actual practice in some schools. This author points out the value of such participation and suggests areas in which students can make most telling contributions.

STUDENT participation in curriculum improvement programs is a matter of growing importance today. It is a natural development in the trend toward broadening the base of participation in school affairs which may be observed on every hand. First supervisors and department heads were asked to help solve curriculum problems; then classroom teachers were brought into the picture; more recently parents and other lay people have been encouraged to lend a hand in the planning and managing of school affairs. The next decade may well see the students generally accepted as worthy and effective members of the curriculum improvement team.

In a small Indiana high school, students have been taking active part in the solution of certain school problems. A "sock hop" following a basketball game was cut short in favor of extra time to prepare for certain examinations the next day. The cafeteria menu was talked over with the proper author-

ities, and soon thereafter the meals gained considerably in popularity.

Specific details of the Christmas program, the decorations, the skits, the singing, were all decided by the students; every class was represented. Other problems relating to minor matters of discipline and particularly the problem of teen-age driving in the community were considered also. The administrators of this school admitted that these were only small beginnings from which they hoped that student participation might grow increasingly significant. The president of the Student Council commented to the author that opportunities to take part in solving school problems helped students understand better what school was all about, made them more willing to support the program, made them "feel better" about school.

The concept of student participation referred to in this writing implies that youngsters need opportunities to exercise initiative and responsibility in

formulating school policies and in planning and managing the school curriculum. Curriculum is here meant to include all those learning experiences of students for which the school assumes responsibility, even though that responsibility may be shared with other persons or agencies. Student participation does not imply that the youngsters will be the only ones working on curriculum problems—or that the students will be given complete control of the school program. Such notions are absurd, and those who voice them do the cause of education much harm.

Youngsters are not mature adults, and they are well aware of it, in spite of occasional pretense to the contrary. They need and want guidance of various sorts. Their deliberate involvement in curriculum improvement programs along with teachers and other adults, would promote the kind of healthy interaction that must surely lead to better understanding and appreciation of each for the other. In this way common problems and common purposes are more easily discovered.

The concept of student participation sponsored here permits no fraud. It is completely dishonest to offer youngsters opportunities to participate and then ignore all that they do or say; or even worse, to harass or cajole them into complete compliance with the wishes of adult members of the working group. Such circumstances have caused the rapid disintegration of more than one student council. Youngsters are not fools; they are not easily deceived. As a matter of fact, such duplicity is proof to the young that their elders do not really believe what they often say about the democratic process.

New Courses for Old

The broader concept of student participation in curriculum improvement programs is illustrated by a large metropolitan school in Indiana. Here students had opportunities to participate in revamping old courses and developing new ones. They were instrumental in the integration of mathematics and science activities at the ninth grade level. They helped develop new courses in psychology, in senior composition, and in family living. While the latter is a completely voluntary, non-credit course, about 300 students and parents are enrolled. From this school the course has spread to other schools in the city and has gained national attention.

The students have worked together with teachers and parents in many other ways. The Student Council and the Alumni Association cooperate in planning and managing homecoming activities. The students and the Parent-Teacher Association work together in organizing and carrying out the Commencement Night Program—which concludes with breakfast! The Student Council and the PTA furnished a room for the Student Center in the Homemaking Cottage, and students have complete responsibility for scheduling and supervising its use. Students in this school cooperate with a Fathers Association to promote a broad safety program, and together they plan and manage a Joe and Jane Dance which is free to some 800 youngsters. Students also attended a summer session class at one of the state universities, to help prepare for the establishment of a reading clinic in the high school; later they

helped rate books for readability. These students were also represented in a pre-school curriculum planning workshop, sponsored by the local school system and involving the PTA, the Board of Education, the school administration and teachers, as well as the students.

In a personal interview with the writer, both the principal and the vice principal indicated their conviction that student participation in curriculum improvement programs is extremely worth while. They considered it essential to the developing maturity of the students. They estimated that about 85 percent of the teachers favored it. Parents generally appeared to encourage it. Students liked it: this was attested to by the ease with which they worked together with teachers and others, and by the fact that they considered it important enough to spend a great deal of time in these activities.

Areas of Concern

Here, then, are some of the significant areas of the school program in which student participation has already been uncovered—areas in which their participation seems highly desirable. Students can help teachers and parents and others develop school policy and formulate broad purposes for which they shall strive together. Students can surely help define their own needs, interests and purposes. Students can help discover the major community needs, interests and potentialities which should find focus in the school program. Youngsters could also help determine how the common purposes might best be served—through what activities and what arrangements, with what

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materials and resources, from all those available in the entire community. Students can and should participate in the planning and managing of school plant, grounds and equipment. They can, and often do, help plan and manage extra class activities. Finally, they can and should help with the continuous and systematic appraisal of the total school program.

Councils and Committees

What are the procedures and devices for student participation? Some have been mentioned previously in this article; many have already been used, and others are still to be invented. Most schools currently employ only a few of these procedures; some employ many. Occasionally where teachers and principals approve of student participation in theory, ways and means of implementing their belief are often neglected. Probably the most common means whereby students participate in curriculum improvement programs is through the student council. The fact that a given school *has* a student council does not necessarily fill the bill, unless that council is given opportunities to exercise initiative and responsibility—together with the adult personnel of the school—in the solving of significant school problems.

Students also participate through membership on curriculum improvement committees, or on school problem study groups, or in curriculum workshops. Perhaps the easiest means is the informal discussion or conference

or interview, where student ideas are deliberately sought out. Where personal contacts are impractical, carefully constructed questionnaires, check lists, or rating scales may be used. The familiar "Suggestion Box" is employed in many schools as a vehicle for student participation. The school newspaper provides another means, especially where frank and open discussions of school affairs are encouraged. Some schools gain student participation through writings and panels and other activities directly associated with classes in language arts, social studies and other areas. Various regional accrediting associations have encouraged student participation in school surveys and evaluations, by deliberately seeking out student reactions through individual and group conferences.

Growing Participation

Student participation in curriculum improvement programs varies a good deal in type and in comprehensiveness from one school to another. Some of it is rather meager and elemental; some is quite mature. There is evidence to show that the practice is becoming more widespread in our schools. About eight years ago, the writer's search throughout the nation uncovered only 110 secondary schools where student participation in curriculum improvement was in evidence. This year he found over half as many cases in a single state.

Opportunities for student participation in curriculum improvement programs are increasing because school people are coming to recognize more clearly the relations among such practices and certain basic concepts of learning and of democracy. It is well estab-

lished today that youngsters learn more effectively when motivation comes from within; when they are working toward purposes which are intrinsically their own; when they are engaged in activities geared to their own needs, interests and abilities; when the activities are closely related to people and conditions that are familiar in the community of the learners; when competent guidance is available; when the atmosphere is free and friendly and conducive to the expending of one's best effort.

The preceding remarks are completely consistent with the democratic idea that all those who are involved in any enterprise should have opportunities to participate in the planning and management of the enterprise. All those affected by a decision should have opportunities to influence the making of the decision. All those concerned with a problem should have the opportunity—and the disposition—to apply themselves to it cooperatively, so that the best possible solution may be found. Best, in terms of each person's freedom and the welfare of all the group together. It would be inconsistent to deny these things in our educational practices throughout a dozen years or more of our youngsters' schooling, and then turn about and expect them at age 21 to behave as if they actually believed and understood the democratic way. Such things must be practiced and observed and analyzed time after time after time. The public schools in the United States have a peculiar responsibility to promote this kind of learning. Remember this when next your school undertakes a program for curriculum improvement. And don't forget the students!

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