

Curriculum Materials in the Making

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Through local preparation and production of instructional materials, one large city school system achieved a better quality in its publications. As they planned and worked together, the teachers, parents and others attained a sense of unity and of professional accomplishment.

THE Grand Rapids Public Schools employ about a thousand teachers and serve approximately 23,000 children. In this school system, as in others that are too large to have frequent "get-togethers" for all teachers, communication becomes a major problem. For a number of years, the schools have made a concerted effort to improve this communication by involving teachers in policy making and curriculum planning.

The purpose of this article is to describe a few general school activities and curriculum projects which the writer believes have contributed to a feeling of unity and to educational improvement.

"What We Believe"

Several years ago a representative group of teachers was discussing common problems. From that discussion came a suggestion that the schools needed a basic philosophy statement—a statement formulated and subscribed to by the entire staff.

How can nearly a thousand teachers

be involved in developing such a statement? The group wrestled with the problem and came up with a working suggestion. It recommended appointment of a representative committee of twenty-five. This committee was charged with responsibility for devising a plan which would involve every teacher.

The city has five senior high schools. The committee arranged an area meeting in each of these buildings. Each group was vertical in organization, since it included the high school staff, the faculties of all the elementary feeder schools, and about a fifth of the junior college faculty and supervisory personnel.

Each area meeting broke into working groups and considered such problems as these:

1. What do we believe about education?
2. How should education contribute to growth?
3. What are our educational aims?
4. What should be the relationship of the school to the rest of the community?
5. What has the community a right to expect from its teachers?

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The central planning committee took the wealth of material which came from the groups, compiled it and sent it to each teacher for suggestion and criticism. Again it was revised. Finally it was formulated into a statement entitled, "What We Believe." Each school then took the material and studied its own program in terms of these goals.

The result of the whole study is a well-illustrated brochure which gives a statement of philosophy followed by a comprehensive picture of what the schools are doing to achieve that philosophy. The publication is used both for in-service education of teachers and for general school interpretation to non-teaching groups.

Handbooks for Parents

Another problem faced by the school is that of interpreting the school program to parents and to other community groups. This question was referred to a joint committee of parents and teachers.

Their suggestion was that the schools prepare a series of handbooks for parents explaining the program of the school system. The proposal was for a series of seven. To date the following instructional handbooks have been completed:

1. *Your Child, Your School and You* (kindergarten)
2. *Your Child of Six to Eight* (grades 1 and 2)
3. *Your Child of Eight to Twelve* (grades 3, 4, 5 and 6)
4. *An Opportunity for Every Child* (special services).

Similar handbooks are planned for the

junior and senior high schools and for the junior college.

Representative groups of teachers and parents have worked on each publication. Each project has taken about a year. All teachers at each particular grade level have been contacted several times for suggestions and criticisms.

Each booklet is well illustrated, gives a brief developmental picture of children of a particular age level, and has a concise non-technical discussion of the general school program. Each has a section devoted to ways in which the home and school can work together. The final section of each describes all the community services which are available to children of the age with which the booklet deals.

Schools have worked out definite distribution programs. Each teacher plans parents meetings of some type near the beginning of the school year. Teachers and parents discuss the booklets, raise questions and plan ways of working together. Frequently, additional meetings or study groups are planned.

The whole project has resulted in fine working relationships between many parent and teacher groups.

A Venture in Textbook Writing

Grand Rapids teachers have written two textbooks for elementary children—*Our City* for third graders and *Michigan My Michigan* for fourth. Both were written by volunteer groups of teachers because they wanted a story of their community and of their state written in terms which children can understand.

The following brief description of the work pattern of the third grade



Courtesy of Grand Rapids Public Schools
THIRD Graders Illustrate Their Own Textbook, Our City Grand, Rapids, Michigan.

groups shows the process that each committee used.

A letter was sent from the curriculum office asking for volunteers to do the planning and writing of these books. From the thirty-five or forty persons who responded, a committee of ten was selected. This committee made a complete listing of topics which pertained to present day or to historical Grand Rapids. This listing was sent to all third grade teachers with a request that they suggest the information they wanted included in the book. Hundreds of suggestions poured in. From this massive detail the committee mapped out a tentative organization. Members then began their research and compilation. They worked with a graded vocabulary list and kept within certain limitations as to sentence length and structure.

The committee met every two weeks, read selections aloud, revised, added to and cut. The members worked this way for about a year and a half. In the process they revised their original outline several times. After the material was fairly well organized the committee members read and reread it with their children. Again they revised the materials in accordance with the reactions and suggestions of the children. Then began one of the most exciting parts of the whole project. The elementary children illustrated their book. The fifty illustrations in the book were chosen from hundreds which they drew or painted.

After the material was complete in its original form, the committee submitted it to the local Historical Society, the State Historical Society, the Chamber of Commerce, representatives

from the C.I.O., a committee from the A.F.L., a number of old Grand Rapids residents, the State Conservation Department, personnel of the public library and city museum, and a number of interested teachers. The manuscript was read for accuracy, content and interest. Dozens of changes, additions and deletions were suggested. Again the committee revised the manuscript in accordance with these suggestions.

Grand Rapids children buy their own books. After formally adopting *Our City* as the third grade social studies text, the Board of Education authorized the publication of 10,000 copies and underwrote the expense. The books are kept in the central supply rooms and are sent out to schools on consignment.

Grand Rapids children have used this book two years. Each group of children and their teacher work out their own related activities. They take trips, paint pictures, make models, dramatize different occupations, write stories and collect products. They use the book as a reference in which they may find answers to the many questions which arise when they become acquainted with their own community.

Revision of the Junior High School Program

A major activity during the past four years has been a revision of the junior high school program. A central planning committee began with the seventh grade. At the end of one year they recommended this program:

Unified geography and English and home room period with one teacher
General shop and home mechanics

(one semester for girls and boys)

Home living (one semester for boys and girls)

Art (three days one semester, two days one semester)

Music (two days one semester, three days one semester)

Health (two days each week)

Physical education (three days each week).

At the beginning of the second year committees were set up to build study guides for each of the suggested areas of the curriculum. Persons who had served on the planning committee all took active leadership. Because the aim was a truly unified curriculum, each committee had representatives from all fields. For example, a teacher from each of the fields of art, shop, music, family living and mathematics served on the unified studies committee.

These groups met every second week. In order to keep the work coordinated, a committee composed of all chairmen and the supervisors involved met on alternate weeks. Finally, representatives of all the committees came together in a joint meeting and considered the problem of integration of the entire program. Each department considered what it could do to enrich the other fields.

A comprehensive study guide was completed at the end of a year. It is

mimeographed in loose-leaf form and every seventh grade teacher has a copy of the complete program.

At the beginning of the second year of the study, an eighth grade planning committee was organized with the same type follow-up the next year. Currently committees are preparing study guides for the ninth grade.

Because schools recognize the limitations of printed materials they have made special efforts to involve teachers in an implementation program. This has included a volunteer week-end junior high conference at a state camp, a liberal school visitation program, several general meetings, a pre-school conference and much planning at the building level.

Other projects have included the production of a film and booklet interpreting a program of education for citizenship, a number of elementary social studies materials, a bulletin of draft information for high school youth, a local song book, a secondary English study guide and a compilation of current classroom activities from the kindergarten through the junior college. Hundreds have participated in the projects. Through this participation they have achieved greater unity, have translated theory into action, and have developed their own creative powers in the field of teaching.

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