

# Editorial

## A Time For Reexamination

**WHY REEXAMINE** the lay person's participation in curriculum development? There was a time when no one would have bothered to raise the question. Few had ever participated. For, after all, the upsurge of interest in citizen's committees and lay participation is of relatively recent origin. One of the earlier publications in the curriculum field devoted to this topic was the ASCD's *Laymen Help Plan the Curriculum* published 12 years ago. The National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools was formed in 1949. Go back another 10—or 20—years and the efforts were scattered and uncoordinated.

In no other period of history has there been such a widespread public interest in the schools. Much of the interest has at times been critical—criticism by pressure groups, organizations or individuals—often sincere, sometimes based on sheer ignorance, but at times rather penetrating though jarring to traditional notions. More recently with the demand for speed-up in scientific research a further impetus has been given to that interest.

The important question in the reexamination process is how educators have reacted to this criticism. Have we viewed it from a calamity-howler's perspective? Or have we seen it as a golden opportunity to work with the public? Have we asked ourselves why some who were critical were not well informed? For, indeed, misinformation and distortion of the facts have at times been rampant in these last few months.

The idea that all criticism of the schools represents an unhealthy situa-

tion is one of the phobias that still persists. Others are easily recognizable: the undefined fear of lay participation which borders nigh unto a lack of confidence in one's practices or unwillingness to subject these practices to close scrutiny; the fancied danger that parents will "take over" the schools; and the tottering belief that the schools should be left entirely to the experts. However, there are many indications of a better adjustment, as witnessed by the articles in this issue. For in many communities lay participation is an accepted fact.

Somewhat more persistent are the stereotypes that have been created. One of the articles in this issue traces the eras of lay participation. Obviously, these periods overlap for we are not out of the woods from the selling stage. Granted that schools need a good public relations program, but selling the public on our product is a far cry from citizens' partaking in curriculum development. The open-house and the invitation to see the school are no longer enough to involve parents in coping with the problems that face the schools.

Or the way in which citizen cooperation is obtained for curriculum improvement may be narrowed into a convenient groove that fits all occasions, such as the lay advisory committee. But that is only one of the many ways by which lay people can participate in the development of the curriculum. For curriculum development goes on in the classroom, in the school trip, in extraclass activities, in curriculum committees, in workshops, in teacher-pupil and teacher-parent conferences, in school surveys, in community

studies, in child-study groups. All of these present rich possibilities for involvement of parents and other citizens.

### What Limits?

One of the issues is to what extent lay participation should be limited. The "safer" areas are considered as buildings, school finance, and teachers salaries. They are likely to be less controversial, or more immediate in nature, or easier to tackle. These may be regarded as the proper subjects for study by the citizenry. One point of view would limit the extent of sharing in determination of the school curriculum to the development of objectives or of content. Viewed in the light of the definition of curriculum in terms of experiences, any attempt to separate content from method or purpose from evaluation for study by lay groups is an artificial division. A public informed in all aspects of developments in education is an asset of incalculable value in planning a sound program for the school.

Closely allied is the question of whether participation shall be rigorous or superficial. Listening groups may be well informed but their vast resource of knowledge is not utilized for improvement of the program. It is at best a narrowly circumscribed manner of taking part. Nor is citizen participation that results in real progress of the casual kind, a mere going through the motions. It means, on the other hand, an obligation and a willingness to study; gather data; read widely on issues, research and practice. It means going through the most difficult process of defining a problem and also partaking in the development of conclusions or recommendations. Truly, it is a process of mutual growth and sharing of ideas, as is true of all education worth its salt.

Obviously, whether such cooperative study of an intensive kind will be achieved hinges upon the question of whether or not we want to change. Because if it is more comfortable to retain what we have and do as we have always done, clearly this level of participation can be regarded as risky. Somewhat less apparent is a question closely interlocked with this issue: Are there permanent answers in the curriculum field of such a permanent nature that they are not subject to change under the scrutiny of study and research? Without question, some reactionary elements seeking to influence education serve their purposes best through propaganda and appeal to the traditional.

An even more important question would seem to be: Can we afford *not* to have continuous lay participation? There is an ominous danger in the investigations of textbooks, the book-burning attempts, and the stifling of discussion of controversial issues. These are genuine threats to public education that seeks to perpetuate democratic ideals. A new threat seems to be efforts to have us copy an educational program suited to a culture with entirely different ideals. Shall regular channels of communication with the lay public be established or shall curriculum change be dependent on demands of pressure groups operating from time to time? Present events that highlight the accelerated pace of technological change emphasize the fact that schools cannot afford intermittent, discontinuous attempts at two-way communication with the public.

### Why Lay Participation?

The question as to why the lay public should participate in curriculum development seems to be well answered by the discussion and illustrations in the ac-

companying articles. The rationale is the same as for lay participation of any kind. Foremost is the need for intelligent, well-considered action by an informed public. Because the public schools belong to the public, and it will in one way or another determine what the schools are going to be like.

In times such as these we are likely to make hasty decisions in an atmosphere of frantic competition for survival. In any day and age, the best school program for the particular community comes about as the result of close school-community cooperation. In a time when the changes that will occur in the next decade or two stagger the imagination, all the best efforts of the total community are needed to determine how the school program can best keep pace with

changes in society and prepare youth to cope with unforeseen developments.

It is an axiom that people need to be involved in the process of change in order to change their beliefs, attitudes and behavior. In times of mounting social problems crying for solution—such as achieving a peaceful existence and a way of dealing with one's fellow men with justice and humility—there is a greater need than ever for maximum involvement in order to hasten the process of changed behavior and for cooperative effort to improve the school program. It is indeed a time for reexamination of lay participation in developing the curriculum.

—VERNON E. ANDERSON, *dean, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park.*

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