

What Are Our Goals?

*Important in curriculum revision
is the setting of
realistic objectives.*

SUPPOSE you were to ask someone who taught in an elementary school in the 'thirties, "What do you think of today's teachers, as they try to refine and sharpen some of the goals for teaching?" You would be apt to get an answer something like this, "I think school people could spend their time doing other things that are much more worth while."

The reason for this response might be that many teachers left the 'thirties with a strong distaste for such work. In those days many after-school and evening hours were spent perfecting outcomes and objectives—"chewing upon words," the recalcitrant ones termed it. Every school system published its courses of study, and made necessary advertisings so that neighbors and friends knew what was going on. The fatigue of this work, and the boastfulness as to what would follow as a result of the effort often led, I suspect, to a conclusion that nothing good would come from it.

As an exercise one needs only to look around him and see the beautiful new school buildings, more livable in every respect, see the fine libraries, the trips

available at a very low cost to students who once never moved out of their community. Then when he returns to those old courses of study, he may see a high correlation existing between these good things of today and the goals written into these old curriculum guides and course of study materials. Perhaps this gives more credit to the work of teachers 20 years ago than is deserved. Other persons, such as religious leaders, scientists, sociologists and politicians advocated many things that had a great impact upon schools. The enunciations of the courts, organizations, and of many agencies and institutions found their place within the school program. The feeling that some teachers of 20 years ago had that they alone were working to upgrade the school was not wholly true. In most instances they were simply working separately from others.

And the reasons why teachers and school administrators worked separately in those days are not difficult to discern. There were too many issues and cross

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currents. Any subject that was noncontroversial could easily become such by simply inviting the public to discuss its merits. Thus, it was much easier for school people—and in many instances it was the only way—to close the school door and make their own revision. And, of course, that action caused the criticism that school people were attempting to lift themselves by their own bootstraps. This had its effect upon school people. It was not as pungent, however, as the admonition given by Dorothy Thompson and others in the late 'thirties, that school people could never lift the community school above the thinking of the community, try as they might.

Today the old problem of controversy continues to plague the school as much as ever, often creating the sort of climate that is obviously poor for good instruction. But it is the only base that we have, and we have to make the best of it. Actually, controversy is characteristic of a good democratic state, and much of it will greatly influence the school. And hope as we might we are not going to get a public to face issues and compromise upon all of them so that a solid background is provided for good instruction.

Actually some teaching will always be dangerous. Usually teachers can come out unscathed in teaching controversial issues if they confine their work to their classrooms. But sticking one's head in the sand by closing the school door to controversy will not only breed suspicion, it will eliminate many of the good things that we are attempting to teach. The use of highly debatable topics without fully exploring the controversy around each one is eliminating one of the main reasons for the lesson. This is not to say that we cherish controversy

so that we become insensitive to what the use of too much of it does to good instruction. We can use it and at the same time applaud the President and other persons as they attempt to get citizens to come to common agreements and to build both national and local goals.

There is, however, much room for us to work. We can sharpen our goals and methods in many fields that are noncontroversial. Many schools are doing such.

A school staff in a low socioeconomic area became conscious of the fact that it was attempting to teach students to read before they were teachable. The pupils would sit and hold the book, but they (a majority) would not learn. This problem was brought to the attention of the entire staff. Staff members accepted a plan for delaying reading for those who could not master this skill at the age of 6, 7 or even 8. Science, arts and crafts were increased in the primary school program. Today this school has the best reading program it has ever had, and no one doubts that the improvement has grown out of this earlier recognition of a clear-cut need in the school program.

The pushing of any one area too hard, without giving the community time to grow to accept it, is often a very bad thing. Sometimes, though, a new idea will grow into an acceptance and use that is most gratifying. When we began our library in the Nassau School more than 25 years ago, many people thought that it was nothing more than a fad. WPA workers, interested parents and faculty members promoted it for 10 years before we got a trained librarian and before a special appropriation was made for it.

Difficulties regarding good goal setting, and hence good curriculum construction do not stem entirely from either an indifferent or a bickering populace,

but often lie in one group of workers getting in the way of another group. In methods, for example, a state, a county or a large city may find it extremely difficult to plot a good course for the teaching of reading. Communities and faculties may differ greatly in approaching such an area. Sometimes the larger communities can give the smaller ones aid. Such help should, however, never be in the form of prescription. There is a larger field in which agencies can perform useful service. A state department of education, for example, recently sent out statistics to the local schools on the mounting traffic accidents in the state. This was performing a task that no one local school system could do as well. This served as stimulus to many principals of small schools to call faculty meetings to devise ways and means to cut down traffic accidents.

New Goals

Above all, let us be honest with ourselves in reaching for new goals and methods. If there is anything that school people should practice, it is humility. Our schemes have not been wholly successful even when we have had solid backing from the public—thus we can ill afford to be cocksure. For example, remedial reading teachers have recently been added in many schools. Some of the arguments used to get public support for these special teachers were these: remedial reading requires the work of a specialist; remedial difficulties are too profound to be discovered by the regular classroom teacher or the parent; and the proper techniques, it is said, are too intricate for these persons to administer.

Recent evidence does not fully support these claims. Just common everyday techniques that classroom teachers

have used for years that stimulate children to read are proving as effective as any that are known to remedial reading teachers. Moreover, the common cry among remedial reading teachers is that they need more backing from the parents. What can parents do that is so significant? About the same thing that good parents have done for their children for generations. "It is time for you to read, Tommy." "Do you like the story you are reading?" "Come, I'll help you with that word." And, of course, the present day parent has another, "Turn off that television now; it's time for you to do some reading."

Supplementing the very fine work of our remedial reading teacher, Lillian Richtberg, in the Nassau School, is some excellent work by parents. From the cotton fields recently a mother came, bringing her son who was 11 years old and still reading a primer. We explained to this mother that such a deficiency placed a great strain upon the school as well as upon the child. We assured her, nevertheless, that if she, the mother, could give some help in remedying the situation, this would be appreciated. She accepted the challenge. A few periods were spent teaching the mother some simple techniques. Three times a week she came to school and helped her son with reading. On the week-ends the mother and child read a great amount together. After two years, Ray was not far behind the average of his class in reading. And everyone was more than willing to give full credit to that busy but interested parent.

There are other subjects that are commanding the attention of educators today that should be examined carefully before they are embraced in the school program. Noteworthy now is the teaching of foreign languages in the ele-

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mentary school. The European schools apparently are doing a more thorough job than we are in this area. In many schools they start language instruction earlier, for example, in the fourth grade. The students learn to speak a foreign language before they learn to read and write it. It is axiomatic that if a person is to speak a language well he must begin its study at an early age.

If this were all we know about European instruction in languages, then it would be a simple matter for us to secure language teachers. It would be widely acceptable, too, for the public is weary of spending money upon the teaching of foreign languages with little or no positive results. But the Europeans base some of their success in language instruction upon the performance of those youngsters who are selected for college at the age of 10, 11 or 12. It is principally upon the record of these children who are destined for college and who comprise only a small percent of the total school population that we are asked to judge the value of the introduction of a foreign language in the elementary grades. In addition to this, many European children have an opportunity to speak, in the stores and on the

streets, the languages they are studying, a privilege not available to children in many areas of the United States.

A community proposal of this kind should be weighed in relation to several questions. Would the teaching of a foreign language be the most valuable study that can be introduced at this time in this school, in this community? As the children study the foreign language do we have an environment that will keep this particular foreign language alive for them? For example, will the great increase in low cost transportation to Europe enhance a need for study of Western European languages in our schools? Will this similarly be true of Asian, or African, or South American languages?

Curriculum construction is a complex work. It has always been so, and it always will be. Having lived through the great task of writing courses of study in the 'twenties and 'thirties, I am inclined to leave the reader with several thoughts. Don't require teachers to do too much writing of courses of study after hours. If teachers lead full lives and spend a busy day with their students they are carrying their primary assignment. Don't hold too many large meetings. It is much better to bring together a small group to discuss the problems centering about one school. The results of such discussions should take the form of short written or oral agreements.

If someone should be concerned about the best way to get started in curriculum construction, let him not worry. Simply encourage each member of a faculty to bring to the attention of the entire group the areas that should be studied. Before long, if each idea is given proper respect, the group will have good curriculum work going on and quite likely will be looking for time to tackle new areas.

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