

*A trend may be evident in  
today's changes  
in high school curriculum.*

Dale L. Knapp

## Curriculum Change— By Drift or Design?

"WHAT shall the high schools teach?" This query serves as a recurring and increasingly insistent question in the minds of many school people. A considerable number of influential voices are being raised to supply the answer by prescribing a curriculum which its authors deem admirably suited to the needs of the space age.

In view of the present international tension and this nation's apparent deficiency in scientific and technological leadership, the answer tends to be in the direction of strengthening requirements in mathematics, science, and foreign language. Paralleling this is a vigorous interest in providing special programs for the talented. In short, there is deletion or minimization of learning experiences which are believed to have no direct contribution to technological development and scientific advance. Consequently, few courses in art and music are being added to the curriculum and proposals are being made to teach vocational

and other "nonacademic" courses in a thirteenth year or in the summer or, in one way or another, to make such courses secondary or peripheral in the high school program. A priority system is thus beginning to emerge which, while seemingly responsive to the social demands of the time, is seldom based upon any carefully considered concept of major values or purposes of a high school program intended to serve all youth.

### Direction of Change

This apparent absence of central purpose and the lack of serious consideration for the fundamentals of curriculum development became clear to the writer in a recent study of curriculum change in Ohio secondary schools.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to determine the nature of change in the high school curriculum as well as, the extent to which some of the fundamental principles of curriculum development are

<sup>1</sup> Dale L. Knapp. *An Evaluative Study of Curriculum Change in Ohio Secondary Schools*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1959.

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in evidence, the writer made a questionnaire study of 365 secondary schools in Ohio. This figure represents approximately 33 percent of all secondary schools in the state. A somewhat restrictive definition of curriculum change was used, i.e., curriculum change referred primarily to courses added or dropped and/or the reorganization of separate subjects into various types of block-time classes.

The direction of change, as determined from this study, is unquestionably towards an expanded and enforced academic program. Additions in the last five years, of courses required of all students have been primarily in the areas of social studies, health, English, science, and mathematics. (Social studies and health have been added largely because of requirements or recommendation of the Ohio State Department of Education.) Changes contemplated in the addition of required courses compare closely with changes already made although it is evident that science courses will be added to an increasing degree, since this area ranks fourth in course additions already made but ranks second in contemplated additions. The practice followed by an increasing number of schools is to require an additional year of English, science, and mathematics, thus bringing the total of such requirements to four years of English and two years each of science and mathematics.

Changes made in the elective courses, or the special interest areas of the curriculum, likewise reveal a strong trend toward the academic. Curriculum areas in which the greatest number of schools have added courses are mathematics, English, foreign language, business education, and social studies. In changes contemplated, the areas of foreign language, mathematics, science and English predominate. The latter two areas are on

an equal basis with industrial arts, however, due to the number of small schools that have acquired additional physical facilities. In contrast, there appears to be little activity in such areas as art and music.

To what extent have Ohio schools experimented with or adopted new forms of curriculum design? Data concerning the number and type of block-time classes reveal that 13 percent of the schools studied have adopted various forms of block-time classes. Separate subjects have retained their identity in the majority of such classes although conscious correlation of subject matter was reported in nearly nine out of ten instances. Similar to the results of studies of block-time classes in other states, they were found to exist usually in the junior high grades of the larger high schools. The percentage of such classes increases to 21 percent when only the junior high schools and six-year high schools are considered and to 44 percent when junior high schools are considered separately.

### Process of Change

Are changes, such as those discussed above, based upon a consistent philosophy of education? Do they come about through democratic processes? Do they result in any significant changes in learning materials? The answers to these questions suggest possible areas of weakness as well as realistic problems facing school heads. For example, while over 80 percent of Ohio schools reported possession of a written philosophy of education, one-half of the schools failed to respond when asked to what extent the school's philosophy influenced additions of required courses. An additional 19 percent of the schools reported that changes in general education courses had no rela-

tionship to their expressed philosophy of education. The responses to this question as well as the statements submitted as the major reason for adding each course suggested that many additions came about because of "the trend," "the demands of our age," or because of the need for factual information of a particular kind.

The desire to provide an educational program more suited to prepare academically talented youth for college inspired the great majority of elective course additions in foreign language, science, and mathematics. It is of interest, however, that few reasons given for the addition of foreign languages were associated with the particular language selected. An analysis of comments concerned with contemplated course additions indicated considerable acceptance of the recommendations appearing in the Conant report.

In regard to the use of democratic processes, the findings of this study indicate that decisions to add or drop particular courses in Ohio secondary schools are generally made with the cooperation of the professional staff. Decisions regarding the determination of content for required courses were limited to the administrator in only 13 percent of the responses received and slightly less than 10 percent in the case of elective courses. In the decision to drop a course, however, the administrator more often stands alone. The percentage of cases in which the decision making process was limited to the administrator was 29 percent for general-education or required courses and 38 percent for the special-interest areas or elective courses.

Only rare mention was made of any formal participation by lay persons or students. The prevalence of the basic textbook, as indicated by the data re-

ceived, likewise implies that instructional materials are not generally selected to facilitate pupil-teacher planning or to encourage learning activities other than those usually associated with the assign-study-recite method.

In summary, the findings clearly show that the high school curriculum in Ohio is becoming increasingly college preparatory, that there is danger of an over-emphasis on some needs of the academically talented, and that change is too often motivated by a single criterion—this is the popular thing to do. Apparent social demands constitute but one consideration for intelligent curriculum change. They cannot serve as the sole measure of value.

### Need for Local Study

Does a similar situation exist in your school, in your state? If so, what are the implications for public education and for a responsible consideration of the question, "What shall the high schools teach?" Should change come about by fiat; by reliance on "higher authority"? Students of professional education are answering in the negative. Even a cursory study of the professional literature reveals that curriculum change, if it is to be acceptable and consistent with the needs of a particular group of students in a certain school and community, must come about largely through the efforts of the local group with appropriate consultative assistance. Such change, it would seem, must be preceded by and constantly related to a statement of criteria in which the effect of any given change on the total educational program and on the needs of *all* students is considered.

Secondly, change, if it is to be justified on any rational basis, must be supported with facts about the effectiveness of a

given plan when compared to other existing methods of organizing learning experiences and of attaining stated goals. In addition, evaluation which seeks to answer whether or not certain types of courses and learning experiences really are preparing students for citizenship, for college, and for their own life goals, must come to have a central role in the process.

It is a time for change, to be sure, but it is also a time for experimentation, for examination and for clear thinking about those values which should be primary in

the school program and those which should not. Until the need for a decision on fundamentals is instilled in the hearts and minds of people, it is not likely that they will demand experimentation or even examine alternative proposals. This is obviously a time for educational leadership in which the professional educator must help to guide as well as to respond to the clamor for change. Only when such a leadership role is widely perceived can we expect an adequate answer to the question, What shall the high schools teach?

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#### ETV's Role

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what seems to me the most crucial question of all in relation to the effects of the educational network upon curriculum development in the local school community. The quotation was made by one of the most highly respected authorities in American education:

If there is a possibility that television may be used to teach all pupils within a state or several states or the nation, we must appraise with care what the effects will be on our prized principle of local control of the curriculum. It is difficult, in terms of our tradition, to view with equanimity a situation in which every pupil throughout a state or the nation in the tenth grade would be taught biology at precisely the same hour and in the same way; or where one professor of history would teach all college students in American history his particular interpretation of the causes of the Civil War.

Such a condition would be comparable to that existing in the most centralized

systems of education. Local control of the curriculum has been a great safeguard against any one point of view dominating the education of students, and it has provided a highly effective means of stimulating progress by combating uniformity and undesirable standardization. Television, as envisioned by some, could well erode this principle over the years, an outcome which I personally would view with apprehension.

It will be desirable, in my judgment, as we test the uses to which television may be put, to check persistently against the broader criterion of the kind of curriculum and teaching we wish in our schools and colleges. If some things have to be done for the sake of expediency under the pressure of numbers, let us at least recognize when we compromise with desirable standards of teaching and let us be sure that we are not sold an approach to teaching which will save dollars but will impoverish the educational opportunities of American children and youth.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hollis L. Caswell. "A Curriculum Viewpoint on Educational Television." *Educational Leadership* 15:114-15, November 1957.

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