

# Improving Continuity in the Secondary School

. . . through removing  
enrollment and content barriers.

CONTINUITY of educational experience has been a major concern of educators for the past half century or more. From the research it seems that early concern resulted primarily in programs for improving transition from one school level to another—from elementary to secondary school, and from the secondary school to college.<sup>1</sup>

Recently there has been considerable interest and emphasis on developing programs for improving continuity along the entire range of educational development—not only from school level to school level but from experience to experience on both vertical and horizontal curriculum planes. This article is concerned with efforts to improve continuity in secondary schools as it is affected by two barriers to vertical and horizontal progress. It is not concerned with transition from school to school although this is an important area and one in which there is still considerable room for improvement. Specifically this article deals with continuity as it is affected by *course enrollment* barriers and by *subject content* barriers. It reports on

the experience of one school system which has attempted to improve continuity by removing these barriers.

Traditionally the secondary school has been organized to permit students in heterogeneous groups to progress from grade to grade by completing certain required and elective courses at a given grade level. Oftentimes, a student, regardless of his ability, interest, and previous educational experience, is required to wait until he has completed these requirements, whether he recognizes the need for them or whether he actually needs them, before proceeding to courses at the next higher level. Sometimes a student is not permitted to enroll in courses which are offered at his grade level because he has not completed a prerequisite for the course. So far as the student is concerned, restrictive requirements for moving either vertically or horizontally become a barrier to continuity.

There is little question that schools should establish criteria for enrollment in courses. Yet unless these criteria are

<sup>1</sup>*Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, Third edition. Chester W. Harris, Editor. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960. p. 87-92.

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based on realistic and measurable norms, they will tend to limit learning. This is true particularly for the student who is academically ready to learn but must wait until he has met requirements before being permitted to advance. Moreover, unless criteria are flexible instead of restrictive, continuity for the individual is limited if not impossible.

It appears that the principle of individual differences, as applied to learning, implies flexibility necessary for satisfactory criteria for enrollment in courses offered by secondary schools. This principle states that individuals are vastly different in their abilities, interests and needs; in their readiness for learning; in their rate of learning; and in all aspects involving the learning process. If we accept this principle, our criteria for course enrollment will be flexible enough to permit students to move from one experience level to another as rapidly as they can satisfactorily proceed. Likewise, if some students are capable of beginning their first formal experience at an advanced level they will not be required to repeat the experience offered at a more elementary level.

Even though we establish flexible criteria for course enrollment, continuity is not assured unless we choose subject matter which challenges students. This implies the selection of subject matter that is commensurate with the ability level of students as well as material which is based on the recognized needs and interests of students. Yet when we examine scope and sequence outlines, it is not uncommon to find that they contain material which is unnecessarily repetitious and illogically organized with little, if any, order or clarity; not to mention material which is beyond the maturity level of students. To study such material is a waste of student time and

energy, and does little to promote the principle of continuity.

### Enrollment Barriers

The secondary schools of Brevard County, Florida, have made some progress in removing the restrictive barriers of course enrollment and subject content through their program of ability grouping and curriculum revision. For purposes of instruction in academic subjects, students are placed in accelerated, average or slow groups. Placement in a group is made after careful consideration of the student's scores on intelligence tests, scores on achievement tests, grades on report cards, and recommendations of previous teachers.

These criteria are applied to the student's placement in each academic subject of the curriculum. Thus, a student may be accelerated in science, average in mathematics, and slow in English, or accelerated in all subjects, average in all, slow in all, or other combinations. Placement in a group is never considered absolute and final. Instead placement is flexible with the provision that a student may move to a higher or lower group as his progress warrants.

In addition, provision is made for students to enroll in advanced courses without first having completed elementary courses. Last year approximately half of the students enrolled in Chemistry II (this course used a college textbook) in one of the high schools of the county had not completed Chemistry I. Yet the students so enrolled did as well as the rest of the class; and the class as a whole did as well as the freshman class in the same course at a nearby university. In this illustration all students were in the accelerated group and some of those who had not taken Chemistry I were as much

as two grades behind those who had taken the first course.

To accompany the grouping pattern, the schools have revised course content and arranged it into three levels of difficulty. Insofar as possible, repetitious material has been deleted and each difficulty level has been geared to the needs, interests and abilities of students. Thus, in ninth grade English, the slow group may be learning fundamental skills of reading, the average group making a general survey of literature, and the accelerated group making a critical analysis of some selection in literature. Obviously such a practice would be impossible in a heterogeneously grouped class unless the class were broken into subgroups. Even with subgroups, time and teacher ability would limit the extent to which such wide variation in levels of work could be done. In addition, such a practice would be practically impossible unless the subject content was organized to meet the needs of students of varying ability and interest levels.

Removing the course enrollment and subject content barriers alone will not provide continuity. It must be accompanied by changes in instructional practices. For example: in Brevard County a social studies teacher said, "Students in slow groups have a much shorter attention span and require a constant change of pace and of activities." A science teacher said, "My students can't read and I don't know how to teach them." The head of an English department said, "We have students in every grade who are achieving beyond the fourteenth year."

As a result of these and many other experiences, the administrative and supervisory staff at both the county and local school levels have planned and initiated a number of programs designed

to bring about changes in instructional practices and to help teachers do a better job with students. For purposes of illustration, some of these programs are described briefly.

Through careful study of achievement scores, it was found that students in slow groups were severely retarded in reading, and programs were instituted for improvement. The County Reading Council sponsored a series of workshops on "Improving Reading," two faculty groups began a continuing study of reading, an in-service credit course on "Teaching Reading Skills in the Secondary School" was planned and will be conducted in the spring of 1961. Finally the school board authorized employment of remedial reading teachers for all junior high schools for the 1961-62 school year.

In order to help mathematics teachers improve their instruction and to grasp new concepts in mathematics, an in-service program was organized and a consultant was employed to meet regularly with the teachers. This program has been under way since September of 1960 and has been enthusiastically received.

Special classes have been organized for both accelerated and slow students. One school is doing extensive experimentation with ungraded courses. Its program has not been under way long enough for final evaluation but the results at this time are extremely encouraging. Advanced standing and remedial courses are available in all senior high schools and students are enrolled in these courses in accordance with their ability.

A comprehensive program of curriculum improvement is under way. It consists of revising existing courses of study, developing courses of study for new programs, and organizing materials of instruction for continuity.

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