Curriculum Planning by Subject Matter Groups

THE National Education Association lists 1 these affiliated subject area groups:
- American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation
- American Industrial Arts Association
- Department of Home Economics
- Music Educators National Conference
- National Art Education Association
- National Association of Journalism Directors
- National Council for the Social Studies
- National Council of Teachers of Mathematics
- National Science Teachers Association
- Speech Association of America
- United Business Education Association
- Vocational Education.

In addition, there are unaffiliated subject area groups such as the National Council for Geographic Education, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Modern Language Association.

These associations characteristically publish one or more journals, produce annual or biennial conventions (and in some cases regional conferences), conduct business affairs of the groups, and participate in various curriculum studies—some in cooperation with other organized groups. Yearbooks are published by a few of the associations, such as the National Council for the Social Studies, and special publications such as the Research Quarterly of the American Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, are issued by others.

Impact on Planning

What is the impact of these subject matter groups upon curriculum planning? As one considers the activities and interests of the professional groups in content areas he is not sure whether the publications, programs and platforms of these associations influence or merely reflect widespread concerns of teachers about what ought to be taught and how it ought to be taught. It is apparent, however, that much of the organized effort of our subject area associations centers upon problems of curriculum planning and improvement of instruction. Some spokesmen from the subject groups might feel a very direct relationship between their association's activities and general progress in the particular subject area. W. Wilbur Hatfield.

who was editor of the *English Journal* from 1922 to 1955, has stated:

A mere glance over our shoulder shows us how steep and in spots rocky is the road up which the teaching of high school English has come in the last fifty years. . . . Few present members of the NCTE know that it was organized by a committee to "lay before the college entrance examination board the views of high school principals and teachers" concerning the college requirements—that is, to protest these shackles.

The improvements have come through the classroom attempts, the sharing of results and insights by classroom teachers. Even the desired modification of the colleges' demands upon us has been hastened by our organized expression of our opinions. In fifty years we have come a long, long way up a steep and rocky, sometimes slippery climb.

The 1961 yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies presents views which the writers obviously expect to be considered by thoughtful teachers of social studies both in secondary schools and in college.

What the thirty-first Yearbook has to say to the high school teacher it says also, at least in part, to the professor who teaches history classes in which prospective teachers are enrolled. He, too, must bring his venerable lecture notes up-to-date in the light of recent historical research. He, too, must reassess his purposes and methods, re-emphasize fundamental concepts, capitalize on the values of biography, maximize the use of investigative papers, and stimulate wide reading by his students. And he must never forget that many of his best "customers" will be, not research historians with impressive publication lists, but high school classroom teachers who will be more effective teachers because they have been under his instruction. What is the worth of this yearbook? It is a storehouse of stimulation and help for the high school teacher of history who cares enough about excellence in education to seek to improve the quality of his own instruction. But it is also more. It is an immensely encouraging example of how the channels of communication between scholars and teachers can be re-opened in a cooperative effort to improve the quality of social education.

Hurd is cautious in evaluating the effects of curriculum studies in biology:

There is no real way to judge the extent to which the biology curriculum committees, for the seventy-year period covered by this study, were effective in bringing about changes in either the content or conduct of biology courses. It is apparent that the ideas for the improvement of biology teaching being discussed today are quite similar to many of those suggested before the turn of the century. One would find it difficult to date or to place in sequence the committee efforts of the past if they were not identified by year of publication or membership. Yet there have been changes in biology teaching. Only a small fraction of these, however, directly reflect the specific recommendations of an identifiable committee. Sometimes the suggestions of a committee did not appear to bear fruit until a half century later; witness the consistent efforts to make laboratory work "a study of living organisms," and to have courses focus on the significant concepts of biology. Nearly every committee recommended that more attention be given the nature of science in biology teaching, but there is little of this to be found even today in textbooks or classrooms.

Hurd's study is a careful tracing of events dealing with curriculum problems and issues in the teaching of biology.

---


from 1890 to 1960. The study deals with many committees and commissions, some from professional associations, some from learned societies, and some from research supported by the National Science Foundation. The chances are that such a study in depth in our other subject areas would produce similar uncertainty about just who or what forces bring about change in a subject field content or method. Change may be accomplished by a combination of persons, events and movements as hinted by the editors of the English Journal:

The half-century of progress summarized in this Golden Anniversary Convention Issue . . . has not come merely through the attrition of time. Rather, it has resulted from unflagging efforts by the Council (of Teachers of English), its commissions and committees and publications; by great teacher educators . . . and others; by enlightened publishers interested in education as well as in dollars; and, probably of key importance, by dedicated teacher-scholars in the high school English classroom. Nevertheless, some of our subject area groups, in their publications and in their studies, are facing issues in their fields specifically and forthrightly. The lineup of articles in the September 1960 issue of the English Journal is:

Conflicting Assumptions in the Teaching of English
The Teaching of Early American Literature
What Is a Good Unit in English?
Unit Ideas for the New School Year
Images of the Hero—Two Teaching Units.

The first article proceeds from this statement:

Slowly but surely, for a period of fifty years, a gulf has been developing between the assumptions traditionally held by Eng-

lish teachers about the nature of the language arts and the assumptions forged by research scholars and theorists in the field. Though we may not be able to measure the amount or the significance of the impact of such discussions on English teachers, we may fairly observe that the alert English teacher who wants to compare notes on his own concepts and practices has access to much helpful material in the English Journal. A companion journal, Elementary English, is also published by the council.

In the May 1961 Science Teacher one of the articles compares science teaching in Great Britain with that in the United States:

We are accustomed to think of a "course" as a horizontal "line" in the over-all curriculum. Thus we speak of "tenth year biology" and "ninth year general science." We say, "A student in our high school takes chemistry or physics in his eleventh or in his twelfth year." In general, we think of a course as being of a year's duration. At the end of the year, students take an examination, receive a cumulative mark, and breathe a sigh of relief. In the course of his year's work, the teacher seldom thinks of the student's past experience with the subject or of his future experience.

In the British system, the concept of a course is vertically oriented with respect to the curriculum. In other words, a course is considered to consist of two or three and up to six years of experience in the subject. It is interesting to note that we in the United States are just beginning to think in terms of a K-12 program in science education. To make any headway, we shall have to pry ourselves loose from our "horizontal" orientation.


Similar discussions on topics of concern about curriculum can be located in the journals of most of our professional subject groups, though the quality varies and, though a few groups indicate considerable preoccupation with legislation, financial support, and sundry activities to get other folk to appreciate the unique role "our subject ought to occupy in the curriculum."

How many persons are reached by discussions in the professional journals on curriculum issues? This is difficult to determine because no one knows how much a magazine is read or how many persons in addition to the subscriber may have access to it. Membership in the National Science Teachers Association is indicated as 18,000 for 1959-60. If we assume the number of science teachers in our high schools to be around 70,000, we can conclude that many science teachers do not have contact with material in their professional journal unless there is a lot of borrowing going on.

**Attendance at Meetings**

On the other hand, the National Council of Teachers of English has about 60,000 members. There must be around 85,000 English teachers in our high schools; however, some of the members of the National Council of Teachers of English are elementary teachers and administrators. This would be true of the other associations also. Only personnel in individual school systems could answer the question as to whether their people are being reached by the professional journals and other activities of the subject matter associations. Does your school system encourage membership in the subject groups? Does it encourage attendance of teachers at the national conferences?

Someone has been encouraging attendance at the national conventions because participation of 1500 to 2000 and more is becoming common. Here again there is no way of measuring the impact of the conferences upon the thinking and practices of members. Obviously the participation can range from the deeply concerned to the not even amused. The content of programs, however, would indicate for the main an awareness of and interest in significant curriculum issues. One day's sessions at the 1959 conference of the National Council of Teachers of English were planned around perspectives, developments, and techniques. Under perspectives were listed these group meetings:

- On Literacy Today
- On Basic Language Concepts for Teaching
- On Usage
- On Communication: The Base for Curriculum Planning
- On Unit Teaching
- On the Search for Standards

Sectional meetings for one afternoon at the 1960 meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies presented this fare:

- Interpreting and Teaching American History
- The Impact of the World Population Explosion
- Reading in Elementary Social Studies
- Administration and Supervision in the Social Studies
- A Program in Teaching World Affairs: The Glens Falls Experiment
- The New Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy
- A Two-Year Social Studies Program in Grades 7 and 8


---

A Challenging Social Studies Program for Grades 11 and 12
A Two-Year Social Studies Program for Grades 9 and 10
A Two-Year Social Studies Program for Grades 11 and 12
The Frontier Hypothesis Today
The Quality and Quantity of Current Social Studies Research.

Just as the quality of participation in a national conference varies, so also does the quality of program offerings among the various national associations. The sheer immensity in size of some of the national gatherings is enough to dismay one. This, coupled with the considerable number of affiliated, related and subsidiary meetings which tag along with some of the conferences, in some cases requires program booklets of more than 100 pages in length. Some meetings overdramatize the panel type presentation and in too many situations there is no follow through even when genuine issues are discovered. Generally speaking, topics which begin with “the role of,” “the status of,” and “the problems of” indicate relatively nothing as to what may occur in such a panel or group discussion. Nevertheless, several of the national subject matter associations have held to a high standard in program offerings.

Other activities of subject area groups include sponsorship of state, regional and community associations, association research studies, and cooperative research studies. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics lists eight pages of affiliated state and community mathematics councils. Two examples of association sponsored research are:


About Current English Usage and Literature and Social Sensitivity. Several of the subject area groups have cooperated with such associations as the National Association of Secondary-School Principals (modern languages, English, social studies).

We can observe, then, that the professional associations in the subject areas are engaging in a number of activities relating to curriculum issues and planning, such as national conferences, journals and other publications, and various research studies. Membership is increasing and attendance at national conferences is increasing. Membership draws not only from secondary and elementary subject area teachers but also from college professors, authors of textbooks, interested lay citizens, and leadership personnel both administrative and instructional.

What bearing does all this activity have on a particular school system’s policies and practices? This can be answered only in terms of the extent and quality of participation by local school personnel as expressed through reading of the journals and research reports, through attendance and acceptance of responsibility of local personnel at national and regional conferences, and through a teacher’s studying and modifying his own classroom practices in the light of growth and development stimulated in part by the activities of the professional subject area associations. It is to be hoped that most of the stimulation for teacher growth in skills and understandings is provided by leadership at the local level. The national subject area associations are resources for leadership, not substitutes for leadership.
