

The Role of Government in Curriculum Innovation

*Our educational citizenship
is a three-way responsibility.*

THE respective roles of local, state and federal governments in curriculum innovation in public schools can be defined in general terms. Pupils and teachers meet at the local level, where final judgments are made on details of content and method. But teachers work within imposed limitations. The local school board has broad delegated authority to structure their work. The state has legal responsibility for provision of suitable education for all pupils, including minimum standards for instruction. The federal government touches the curriculum lightly, with no direct legal authority to teach except in limited situations such as the military academies and in-service training for federal employees.

The three levels of government thus have somewhat differentiated areas of action, but they work for essentially the

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same total educational purposes. Most of these purposes are achieved, if at all, at the local level where teacher and pupil meet. The higher levels assist in making the learning appropriately comprehensive. The best education for local purposes can scarcely be improved upon for state purposes, and effective education at local and state levels includes responsibility for teaching content that fully serves the national interest in education. Thus our educational citizenship is a three-way responsibility. There should be no serious internal conflicts in purposes or in processes for its local, state and national accomplishment.

The National Interest

The national interest is served along with state, local and individual interests when the teaching process is most effective in pupil learning and personal development. Our concern should be specifically with these results, rather than with the original *source* of information that is taught. Those who promote a "national curriculum" in order "to insure the country's safety" or "to satisfy

the public interest" really seek changes with more obvious emphasis on what *they* believe to be national interests.

Realistically, local and state professional and legal authorities must learn better how to evaluate and to accept or reject proposed curriculum changes. Otherwise, national forces and their state and local allies may eventually impose such changes. We should welcome and benefit from institutionalized curriculum research, whether from federal agencies, universities or foundations. This requires improvement of state and local administrative provisions, if state and local educators are to justify having the last word about what is taught in the schools.

We agree with critics who want to improve provincial and inadequate curricula, but we cannot agree that centralized control using power, prestige and money is the way to achieve our common purposes. We should, instead, facilitate the process of curriculum reform at the local and state levels. We should prepare the way to achieve this where the schools and the children are, and teachers should themselves lead the movement. Few state or local educational governments or teaching staffs have met this challenge adequately, especially as they deal with would-be innovators.

Curriculum improvement calls for procedures to locate and test new content and methods, making certain that innovations accepted for use will bring more educational gain than loss. Efforts to achieve improvements should be intensified, but along lines that will bring constructive change even if results may appear to be slower than desired. Our system of education, which I believe history proves has been organized and operated in the national interest, requires more forbearance than national systems of education in other countries where edu-

cational content is prescribed and the public schools are centrally administered.

Problems of Interaction

Curriculum change poses fundamental problems of interaction between teachers and the public. It should take place in full view of the fact that the public schools belong to the people. We should provide acceptable ways for any individual or organization to enjoy a reasonable opportunity to assist in the improvement of what schools do. We should use good ideas and practices from any source.

Even an individual of the crackpot variety whose ideas are usually impracticable may occasionally start a train of thought and action that will be useful in curriculum development. In Harold Benjamin's delightful satire, *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum*, a major prescription of the paleolithic curriculum was "fresh water fish grabbing with the bare hands." When the glaciers melted and the rivers became muddy, the tribe almost starved until a strange character long exiled for his eccentricities suddenly made a crude net to catch fish. The old curriculum was strictly for living in a land of clear water; it remained for an eccentric to adapt the fresh water curriculum to muddy waters. Even some activities labeled curriculum research are uncomfortably reminiscent of courses in fresh water fish grabbing with the bare hands, but the processing of these is the price for sifting possible contributions from all sources.

Proponents of change such as foundations, foundation projects, universities and the federal government will succeed best if they continue to recognize, as most have, the desirability of local selection among alternative proposals for curriculum changes. The interactions in-

volved in convincing teachers are admittedly complex, but the challenge should be fully accepted as one of professional persuasion rather than prescription. Local and state officials who have legal power to prescribe should not abandon persuasion as soon as they suffer their first feelings of impatience. Early and complete involvement of teachers and administrators in study and experimentation to improve their own work will usually make official acceptance a mere formality.

Those who would be innovators in education need not emulate Madison Avenue. They should be prepared to submit their proposed changes to the crucible of practical testing in the teaching process. The extent to which this is not done may be explained by the lack of clear procedures to provide opportunities for new voices to be heard.

In the development of curriculum in the schools, all citizens outside the school must be fully accepted in one sense and fully guarded against in another. They are often far removed from the teaching process and their differing views often cancel each other. Every school administrator knows the tremendous pressures that can be applied directly at the local level to change the curriculum to fit special viewpoints.

So the American people maintain some 35,000 operating local school districts in 50 state systems of education, over which the federal government has no direct educational authority. Federal constitutional requirements applicable to all aspects of society make strong impacts, as in the case of school segregation, but state or local school systems need not accept federal programs of education. Federally subsidized programs are optional, even though legally justified under the welfare clause of the Constitution

or as incidental to the exercise of other federal powers.

Legal power for formal change of the curriculum is restricted to state governments, including local school boards to the extent they possess delegated powers under state laws. Sweeping reforms have to be acceptable to these legal authorities. Lesser changes can be achieved by professionals alone.

A General Program for Curriculum Innovation

It seems to me that the sifting process for curriculum innovations could be vastly improved by a widespread and planned combination of in-service education of teachers and programs of curriculum development. This has been successful on a limited scale, but teachers have not been sufficiently involved in organized curriculum reexamination as a part of their teaching obligations. Such a pattern has never been given a real trial. It could accelerate improvement within the framework of educational policy and experience, protecting against undue influence while improving opportunities for innovators to be heard.

When I say this challenge has never really been taken seriously, I mean that the administrative arrangements that should be made at the local level to facilitate curriculum change have never been supported on a wide scale. Of course, teachers are now overworked and lack necessary time to make broad curriculum improvements. Their work on curriculum committees is at best insufficient, and at worst a professional farce. A comprehensive program would require a 10½ or 11 month school year for most teachers in almost all districts.

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community. This in itself would be welcomed. But such a mono-cultural approach will be of only marginal value in servicing the demands of our inter-cultural world. We urgently need deep educational contacts with each of the other two cultures.

To develop a high degree of realism, empathy, respect, and sympathy for the people living in the other two major cultures of the world will place massive demands upon our educators. We need more social scientists; fewer European-oriented historians but more who are capable of teaching about the emerging nations; more language teachers for Asian and African languages; more administrators and curriculum builders who will be willing to experiment even at the cost of cutting out a local history course; and lastly, textbooks and materials created by writers who recognize that we all share the same human condition.

Role of Government

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There would have to be administrative and clerical help and money for consultants from universities, national curriculum groups, and other school systems. Total educational costs might increase 5 percent or even 10 percent. For rural schools, special arrangements would have to be made.

At intervals of two to five years, each course of study in public education ought to be completely reexamined in detail by its teachers. They should work together for several weeks, without interruption except to receive advice from consultants and to hear descriptions of new ideas. To illustrate, the twenty high

school biology teachers in a small city should review and revise all the public high school biology subject matter taught in that city, along with their methods of teaching it. They could well spend four or six weeks each second or third summer, with some interim study between workshops.

In such a program, the state department of education could properly perform all administrative chores broader than those feasible for the local district, and in general it should facilitate the movement throughout the state. All prospective innovators should be heard on a consultant basis, with assurance of prompt consideration of their recommendations. Modernization of the curriculum and the in-service training of teachers within such traditional American patterns of control could improve education without the present delays and misunderstandings.

The Time Is Opportune

The present educational climate is favorable for reform. Teachers and specialists in subject matter and methods work together more easily than ever before. The legal authorities are also increasingly involved, so problems of content, methods and administration are more and more being considered together.

The tempo of curriculum research and experimentation has increased, and so has acceptance of change. More teachers and educational authorities have attitudes of open-mindedness and willingness to try new content and new methods. Local and state leadership is in a position to pave the way, with primary responsibility to preserve the integrity of the pupil-teacher relationship that current conditions endanger.

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