

# The Superintendent: His Own Curriculum Director?

An Essay in Criticism

By Alexander Frazier

*Combining the art of the critical essay and the book review, Alexander Frazier here analyzes the superintendent's responsibility for curriculum improvement. He also assesses the impact of the following publications:*

HENRY M. BRICKELL. *Commissioner's 1961 Catalog of Educational Change*. Albany, N. Y.: State Education Department, October 1961; and *Organizing New York State for Educational Change*. Same source; December 1961.

CARL F. HANSEN. *The Amidon Elementary School*. Englewood, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.

THE superintendent of schools has been confronted in recent years with a new public demand for strong curriculum leadership. Moreover, at the very time when he may have desired to call more fully upon his staff for assistance, he has sometimes discovered a reluctance on their part "to go along with" the kinds of innovations that may have seemed to him, with the channels open to a superintendent, to hold the greatest promise. In consequence, he may have found himself at the mercy of the external supplier

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of curriculum counsel or, perhaps worse yet, he may have been forced to fall back on his own resources.

This dilemma is well defined in recent publications sponsored by two of the most responsive of the "new type" administrators-as-curriculum-leaders. Commissioner James E. Allen, Jr., of New York State, is responsible for an inventory of new instructional approaches in his state and for an analysis of and a proposed solution to the problem of organizing for more effective innovations, the results of which appear in two bulletins prepared by his special consultant in educational experimentation, Henry M. Brickell. Superintendent Carl F. Hansen of the Washington, D. C., Public Schools has himself reported in detail on his already well-publicized "demonstration in basic education," the Amidon Plan. Together these publications document the tasks facing the superintendent who may attempt to respond to new public expectations by becoming, in effect, his own curriculum director.

Commissioner Allen and Superintendent Hansen differ, of course, in their conception of what needs to be done to improve instruction. At the same time, however, they share certain perplexities.

One of the perplexities has already been mentioned. It is that their assumption of new leadership in curriculum development has taken them off in directions where they may have to go without their staffs. The Commissioner's call for "bolder new efforts" has been heard by local schools; "but," as Brickell (or "the Consultant," as he refers to himself) reports, "they feel the same spirit has not permeated the entire Department." In fact, the Consultant found what he labels as a "pattern of 'increasing affirmativeness'" moving upward from "the lower echelons" of the State Education Department, with support for innovation increasing "at each higher level." The reasons for this phenomenon, puzzled over at length, are seen to rest, in part at least, with "individual men," from which the Consultant judiciously generalizes that "it is difficult for any person to advocate one program vigorously while advocating, with equal vigor, that schools experiment with every other type of program."

Superintendent Hansen makes no bones about the "affirmativeness" he feels in behalf of his own ideas. Single-handedly and "from a kind of historical necessity," he has thought out the "union of fairly compatible ideas" that he likes to call "the Amidon concept." He is highly explicit about the uneasiness experienced by his staff as he moved into formulating a "modern, subject-centered curriculum" for the elementary school. In fact, in the introduction to his book he has a section entitled, "What is the effect on staff?" (when the superintendent moves into instructional leadership). No doubt somewhat humorously, he grants that "It is not impossible for the superintendent to learn from his staff." But he then reports an incident in which his elementary supervisors subtly but unsus-

cessfully attempt to "educate" him. However, he understands that he must expect to stand alone since "educators look with a cold eye upon innovations which seem critical of existing practices, as, by nature, innovations are."

Again and again, in reporting points of issue between himself and other educators in and out of his system, he is sustained by his feeling of mission and also perhaps by the support he senses in the broader public context in which he operates. In fact, the only note of impatience with lack of full staff support is expressed in an account of how "the influence of unconvinced principals" cost him, as he views it, a vote of official approval of the Amidon Plan by the District's Parent-Teacher Association. His disappointment pushes Dr. Hansen into making a few mildly admonitory remarks about PTA leadership "at the national and local levels" as having been "led to believe that the path to learning must be strewn with educational lollipops."

### Other Sources of Curriculum Counsel

The two men thus share the common perplexity that faces leaders who may be too far out, as they see it, for their staffs. If they cannot turn to their own staffs for counsel and assistance, then to whom shall they turn? An answer to this question will depend on how the administrator-on-his-own in curriculum development interprets what the public wants.

Commissioner Allen has long since declared himself as to his sources of counsel. In his earlier sponsorship of *Schools for Tomorrow—Today*, he plumped for what he termed "the conditions of education" of the kind demonstrated by the Fund for the Advancement of Education. In the two new pamphlets, he calls for

applying "the utmost ingenuity, imagination, and flexibility in the use of personnel, resources, and facilities." Consultant Brickell reports that

Among the many specific programs he [the Commissioner] wished studied were the use of television, team teaching, large and small group instruction, ungraded classes, and teaching machines. These programs were of moment not because any conclusion had been reached as to their value, but because they all require some rearrangement in the way blocks of time are organized, in the way teachers work with students, in the allocation of physical facilities, and in the use of instructional equipment and materials.

Excluded from consideration, by the way, were "classroom practices," defined as "the behavior the teacher is usually free to exhibit in his own classroom with his own pupils."

The inventory used to collect reports of new programs suggested listing those which involve television, ungraded classes, teaching machines, flexible scheduling, nonprofessional assistants, and team teaching. The selection, from the 1550 reports received, of 296 for inclusion in the *Catalog* was governed, it is indicated, by interest in the kinds of programs just named plus materials from national curriculum studies and accounts of elementary foreign language teaching. Both the New York State reports were made under a gratefully acknowledged grant from the Fund for the Advancement of Education.

As to Superintendent Hansen's sources of counsel, these are not so readily identifiable. The jacket of *The Amidon Elementary School* claims that the book "shows a surprisingly successful effort to meet the criticisms of American elementary schools leveled by Vice Admiral Rickover and his followers, without re-

linquishing the best features of John Dewey's theories." I would suspect, however, that Dr. Hansen has drawn mainly on his own resources; his insistence on specifying in considerable detail what he thinks should be taught in just about every field shows a great deal of self-possession as well as a remarkable ability to get at least part way into most of the subject areas. "It is, certainly, always dangerous to step out of one's field," he concedes at one point. "But I must confess to a deep feeling that the study of art is something more than a romantic, untutored, therapeutic expression of self."

### Self-Directed Curriculum Development

The immediate source of the ideas that characterize his plan may well be the deep feelings that arise from his contemplation of what he regards as the formlessness of modern programs. The solution he proposes has many dimensions but is summarized as

... support of systematically and carefully selected content, clear identification of goals, direct instruction by the teacher, maximum use of textbooks, large-group [i. e., total group] instruction, and concentration upon basic subjects.

Superintendent Hansen testifies that he has "put a lot of time into curriculum building" in his day, "especially in the language field," which he defines as being comprised of "phonics, reading, speech, composition, usage, spelling, handwriting, grammar, and literature."

In this field, he specifies in great detail what should be taught. Flow charts, "based on Dr. Hansen's Behavioral Goals" and appended to the book, indicate where an item is to be introduced and subsequently treated. For example, instruction on the teaching of one use of

the comma begins with this directive for the kindergarten teacher, "Explain the use of the comma after the greeting in an informal note or letter," and ends at grade 6 with: "Achieve habitual accuracy." It would seem that Dr. Hansen is thoroughly familiar with one kind of curriculum building.

His concern for language leads him to include separate phonics teaching from the kindergarten on, reading taught to the entire class at once (the desks are to be arranged in rows and the teacher is to be up front, teaching), grammar begun in grade 4 (where, "Amidon style," the children will learn "that words have grammatical labels just as do the parts of an automobile"), and "penmanship" taught in scheduled periods. Perhaps this account of one area may suffice to indicate the nature of the program that has been called forth by the deep feelings of this energetic administrator. Part of the archaicism is deliberate, of course, "language arts" is discarded as a term because of fear that the parts may be taught together (Amidon teaches history and geography, too, not social studies), and the use of the term "penmanship" may help allay any suspicion aroused by Hansen's insistence on describing his program as "the new progressivism."

### Curriculum Change as Social Response

But part of this straightforward return to educational fundamentalism may have another source. Dr. Hansen doubtless feels that the modern program is formless and ineffective; he may be keeping the Admiral in view, at least from the corner of one eye; he may be possessed by a nostalgia for the good old days. But the real source of concern for achieving a new standard of achievement in the

District's schools may have something to do with the changing population of those schools.

Washington has become, even more than most cities, a mecca for families "from depressed rural areas." During the first semester of 1960-61, the Superintendent reports, 5600 new pupils entered the schools from outside the District. At the same time, 2300 moved out. Most of the families coming in are Negro, a fact that "I would make no point of," the Superintendent states, "except that others will if I don't." In October 1961, the District enrollment was 81.5 percent Negro.

Since desegregation in 1954, "when severe academic retardation was first reported on a city-wide basis," the District has worked hard to upgrade achievement, and improvement is reported. Part of the effort to deal with the situation has been the introduction of a four-track system in high schools (1956), which builds on a three-track elementary program from Grade 4 (two tracks only in Grades 1-3). The Amidon plan is identified as contributing to the upgrading through setting "a high expectancy level for the individual pupil."

Moreover, behind the concept is the Superintendent's conviction that severe educational retardation need not exist. Of low reading achievement, he remarks that "despite every plausible theoretical explanation," he "can no longer live comfortably . . . as I think of the hundreds of pupils in our school system who . . . are crippled readers."

It is here, in the conviction that genuine improvement in teaching and learning can be made, that it seems to me we can again bring Commissioner Allen and Superintendent Hansen into common focus. Both men are highly sensitive to the cultural revolution that is asking for more conscious development of human re-

sources. Both are impelled to act as they can with whatever help they may have at hand.

Commissioner Allen, drawing on the structural "rearrangements" that are being most widely touted, has inspired a proposal for shifting responsibility for developing structural innovations from foundation support onto a tax-based program of design, evaluation and demonstration that might give better answers. Superintendent Hansen just believes that more thorough teaching of more carefully selected content will turn the trick.

One can respect the sensitivity to need and the resolution to act embodied in both approaches, as I certainly do, without accepting the solutions themselves, which obviously I cannot. The movement of the chief school administrator into the curriculum limelight is something, however, that we will have to accept. The problem we face, it seems to me, is how to help the superintendent function in curriculum leadership without wasting his energies and ours in the pursuit of unprofitable short-term "solutions." Reshuffling students and teachers or resuscitating the curriculum of another era is not enough.

### Need for Redefinition of Process

Just how to go about it we do not yet know, but it is clear that we are going to have to define the process of curriculum development in more modern terms. The picture we gain of our function as we see it usurped should cause us great anguish. How much time we ourselves have spent on rearranging the "six structural elements of the institution" defined by Brickell as "teachers, subjects, students, methods, times, places"! How much time we have devoted to selecting and order-

ing bits of information in the kind of "curriculum building" familiar to Dr. Hansen!

One clue to the shape a redefinition of the curriculum development process might take may lie in a new role for the teacher. In the documents we have been examining, the competence of teachers to test out and add to new knowledge is quite frankly and perhaps frighteningly denied. Brickell suggests that help for teachers need not be provided in advance of "launching the new program." It might be useful if it were, he implies, but also he has observed that "the greater the time lag between learning that a new program was to be introduced and actually beginning it, the greater the opportunity for teachers to become anxious." Teachers do need plenty of help afterwards, he grants, because "The real source of rigidity in an educational program is not the written guide or textbook, but is the teacher who knows no more about the subject than is contained in that guide or book." Dr. Hansen also sees the teacher as bound but properly so by a "guide or book" to be constructed by scholars and expert curriculum builders. "Experimental education should never be included in undergraduate teacher preparation," he contends, "and only at the post-graduate level when part of the preparation is in research."

The superintendent is not the only one, however, with a new role to perform. The teacher, despite these documents, is also becoming newly involved in and responsible for the selection of what is to be taught and how it is to be learned. His professional associations, both the content associations and those of a general nature, are moving out in newly aggressive ways to provide direction in the improvement of instruction. The teacher's education or reeducation is being

sponsored outside the school system by government and foundation.

One lead, then, is to redefine the process of curriculum development to make more room for the new functions of both teacher and superintendent. But perhaps the larger question is whether, in acting on our redefinition, we can learn to work in partnership with these colleagues to perform more creatively the functions we may once have thought of essentially as ours—those of keeping purpose sharply in review, of keeping concern for the learner and learning in focus, of relating the selection of content to both purpose and process, and of realizing our best intentions in some kind of balanced perspective. Until we succeed in imagining truly new possibilities for developing capacity and have begun to invent an implementation that may really make a difference, we will continue to be challenged by such proposals and programs as are reported in the publications here under review.

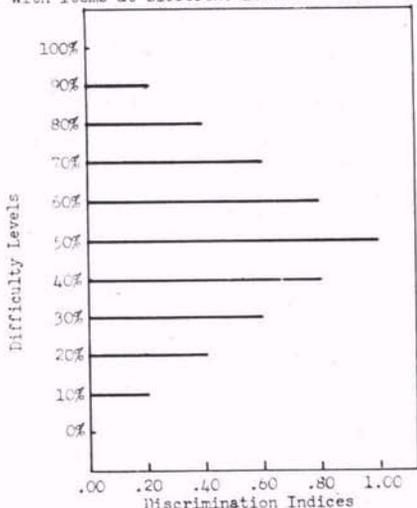
#### Measurement

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nation indices are simply differences between the proportions of correct response from good and poor students. Good students are those whose total test scores fall among the top 27 percent of the students tested. Poor students are those whose scores make up the bottom 27 percent. An item of 50 percent difficulty does not necessarily have (and usually will not have) an index of discrimination of 1.00. Its discriminating power may be zero, or even negative. But items of middle difficulty have higher ceilings on their discriminating power. What is more important, they not only can have, but usually do have, greater discriminating

power than very easy or very difficult items. An item that no one answers correctly, or that everyone answers correctly, cannot discriminate at all. Such an item adds nothing to the reliability of a test.

Figure 3. Maximum Discrimination Attainable With Items at Different Levels of Difficulty



In summary, the 10 principles stated and discussed in this article represent only a sample of the important things classroom teachers need to know about educational measurement. These principles, and the brief discussion of each presented here, may serve to call into question some common practices in classroom testing, or to suggest some ways in which classroom tests might be improved. They are not likely, and are not intended, to say all that needs to be said or do all that needs to be done to improve educational measurement in the classroom. It is our sincere belief, however, that a teacher whose classroom testing reflects an understanding of these principles will do a better than average job of measuring student achievement.

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