

## Curriculum Planning: A Regional Approach

IN the current discussion of a national curriculum within an American tradition of local control, we must not overlook the possibilities of planning the curriculum in an intermediate unit: the region. Curriculum planning can be administered in regions of cities, rural areas, and suburbs. In cities, the region may be an administrative district; in rural areas, a county unit; and in the suburbs, a voluntary association of separate school systems.

The advantages of regional curriculum planning consist largely of an enriching cooperation among contiguous, similar districts and avoidance of wasteful duplication in activities for curriculum improvement. A true story from a suburban area in the East exemplifies the wastefulness of too much independence. Some time ago, three school systems within a few miles of each other engaged in almost identical studies of their language arts programs, without any one of the systems knowing about the work of the others for nearly two years.

In rural areas, where schools fre-

<sup>1</sup>The county's helping teachers, who have given continuous assistance with projects mentioned in this article, include Margaret F. Abel, Wilda Holcombe, Alma Liotta, and Yolanda Nikitaidis.

quently are small and the resources of these schools are few, special need exists for combining efforts in curriculum planning. Regional attack on curriculum problems seems to be working especially well in Hunterdon County, New Jersey. An account of this regional approach follows.

### Regional Organization

Hunterdon County is a rural New Jersey county lying midway between New York City and Philadelphia. It encompasses 29 separate school districts with a total enrollment of 13,000 pupils. These districts vary in size from single school units containing a few classes to multiple units with total enrollments of more than 1,000 pupils.

For several reasons, personnel of the county's schools have adopted a regional approach to curriculum planning: first, they wish to improve understanding among elementary and secondary school

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teachers and administrators; second, they want to develop an educational program with continuity from kindergarten through the twelfth grade; and third, they wish to secure and distribute within the county the best leadership available. The schools of the county have been divided into four regions, each region being served by a high school and its feeder elementary schools. One region consists of 11 elementary school districts surrounding the high school; another, five districts; still another, four; and the smallest, three. School enrollment within the regions varies from 1,200 to about 4,000 pupils.

Effective curriculum work is taking place in each of the four regions. One of the reasons for the effectiveness of this work is that independent districts have been willing to join voluntarily for a common purpose and to pool their resources. Another reason is the role played by administrators, who have shown willingness to work together and to set an example by participating actively as members of committees and study groups. It was, in fact, the superintendent of a regional high school who first invited a group of elementary school principals to meet with him for discussion of mutual problems. Other administrators have followed this practice on a regional basis so that they are conversant with the curriculum programs in their respective regions and are able to explain these to boards of education, parents, and the general public.

The county superintendent of schools serves a liaison function between the State Department of Education and local school districts. As official Hunterdon County representative of the state commissioner of education, the superintendent is urged by the commissioner to give curriculum activity a priority of his time.

The superintendent encourages curriculum projects by attending numerous meetings and by expending about \$5,000 annually in emergency funds, which have been made available by the state commissioner of education for consultant help, library materials, and preparing, typing and duplicating the reports of studies.

University consultants are employed part-time to provide professional help in structuring the programs and in designing the studies within these programs. Four full-time helping teachers, who are associated with the county superintendent and paid by the state, furnish much additional assistance in problems of the curriculum and group dynamics. Each region has the services of at least one of the helping teachers. Significantly, boards of education in the county encourage the regional programs by releasing teachers from their regular duties to participate in study groups during the school day. Through the Hunterdon County Boards' Association, board members have featured programs explaining the work being done in the regions.

### Structure with a Human Touch

How can professional people organize themselves effectively on a regional basis? One way is by forming separate articulation groups and study groups.

In the Hunterdon County situation, an articulation group within a region contains one or more administrators from each participating school district. The group serves as a curriculum steering committee to determine what curriculum problems shall be studied. It makes this determination by discussion and agreement after consulting with the teaching staffs. In the smaller regions, selection and definition of problems have proved

easier than in the larger regions. At the stage of problem selection and definition, competent consultant help is particularly needed and appreciated.

The study group or groups in each region are composed of teachers and administrators who investigate the problems selected by the articulation group. Elementary and secondary school teachers and a few administrators are the group members, and they are chosen largely on the basis of their own interest in the study which is to be undertaken. Every school district has one or more representatives serving on a study group as liaison personnel between the group and individual schools. Meetings are held about once a month and are attended by consultants whenever consultant services are felt to be needed.

One of the study groups, which has concerned itself with children's listening skills, has involved all the teachers in its region, a total of 200, in the process of inquiry and in a general meeting which concluded the formal part of the study. The study group itself has prepared an open-ended curriculum guide indicating some "dos and don'ts of effective listening" and a wide range of pupil experiences in listening, with blank pages for use by teachers in recording their own experiences in teaching listening skills. Other study groups have given their attention to creative writing, vocabulary development, work-study skills in the social studies, program design in the social studies, language structure, selected reading skills, and English for college preparatory pupils. As a consequence of the work of study groups, five written reports have emerged, and these reports are in great demand.

Activities of the articulation committees and study groups in Hunterdon County seem to thrive best where there

is skilled leadership, a friendly atmosphere, and marked willingness to work. In the best-functioning groups, administrators treat teachers as their professional equals. Productivity is greatly enhanced by conducting curriculum meetings in comfortable surroundings and throughout the school day. Cooperative and friendly feelings are engendered to a point at which group members desire social contact with each other. This desire is indicated in part by members' interest in conducting dinner meetings for both social and professional purposes.

### Effective Planning

Each of the characteristics of effective curriculum planning on a regional basis requires analysis:

*Articulation.* Nominally, articulation occurs best in small school systems. However, the very factor of smallness in school systems may induce the invalid assumption that everyone knows everyone else and that communication about practices and policies is therefore taking place. Even in areas smaller than Hunterdon County, articulation must be planned if it is to occur at all.

Hunterdon has established four media for achieving articulation: several regional articulation committees made up of elementary and secondary school principals; study groups within regions involving both elementary and secondary school teachers, periodic institutes for all teachers within a given region; and publications which reach all school personnel within the region in which a given publication is prepared. These media have proved helpful, yet inadequate, and continuous attention must be given to the knotty problem of articulation.

*Economy.* The Hunterdon County program has been operated basically at a

recent annual cost of \$5,000. The chief expenditures have been for consultant service. Employment of a part-time general consultant, and of special consultants as they are needed, seems an economical way of securing help. One full-time curriculum coordinator would cost about three times the aggregate of consultant fees. Under the present arrangement, general and special consultants work where and when they are acutely needed. Purposes that change from region to region and from time to time determine the consultants' activities on their days of service.

The second largest expenditure from the county's curriculum fund is for materials, especially books, monographs, and magazine subscriptions. Apart from the fund, individual school districts contribute financially by releasing representative teachers for full days of meetings in study groups.

*Differentiation of Roles.* Roles of the county superintendent, the four county helping teachers, superintendents and principals in the regions, and classroom teachers have evolved through general understanding rather than by written agreement. The county superintendent seeks to provide comprehensive leadership without dominating the work of regional committees and groups. Each of the helping teachers has assumed major responsibility for the servicing of activities in a given region. This servicing consists of helpfulness to study groups and liaison with the county office.

Superintendents and principals are invariably members of the regional articulation committees, and many of them serve also as members of study groups. Representative teachers spend several days each year in study group meetings, and simultaneously involve other teachers in activities sponsored by the study

groups. Teachers who have no direct involvement in study groups perform the important functions of developing ideas, trying ideas, and reporting reactions in both oral and written form. If it became necessary, precise role definitions could be made, and statements about roles could be reduced to writing.

*Human Relations, Communication, and Involvement.* Need for desirable interpersonal relationships, effective communication, and skillful involvement appears in all curriculum improvement programs. As might be expected anywhere, the major difficulties that have arisen in the Hunterdon County program have centered about human relations, communication, and involvement. The giving and the alleged taking away of status and prestige, competing jurisdictions of individual functionaries, the phenomenon called the hidden agenda, failure of persons to receive messages or to receive them correctly, and problems in securing the most interested representatives to study groups have sometimes blocked progress temporarily. The Hunterdon experience has revealed once more the importance of being sensitive to other people's feelings, needs and potentialities.

The regional projects in Hunterdon County have met with sufficient success to indicate that curriculum improvement on a regional basis should be tried in many other situations. If curriculum improvement should be found definitely to proceed best in units of 30,000 to 50,000 pupil population, regions of corresponding size could be established in cities, rural areas, and suburbs. Major attention should be given to making the size of the unit manageable so that both the human and the technical problems of improvement may more readily be solved.

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