

"Is your material headed for the classroom or for the closet shelf?"

The Curriculum Guide's Weakest Link

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"WHAT'S your destination?" a supervisor recently asked a curriculum guide committee. "Is your material headed for the classroom or for the closet shelf?"

The answer seems obvious. Yet, too often, school systems marshal their best talent to produce fine guides and courses of study which only gather dust. There may be no magic solutions to the problem, but a curriculum staff can go a long way toward eliminating such a dilemma through careful planning and thoughtful action.

The first step, of course, is to find out, before work begins, whether the material is really needed. The impetus for development of a new guide may come from a variety of sources. Suggestions may have been made by individual teachers, administrators, or supervisors. Often the supervisor responsible for a particular subject field may be first to identify the need.

A new guide also may be placed on the priority list because of changes in the curriculum, the necessity of revising or updating existing materials, or the introduction of new curricula. In some cases, the need may arise from new measures passed by the State Legislature or revision of Board of Education policies. Curriculum councils, subject field organizations, and professional associations are important sources of ideas and of information regarding trends.

For Teacher Use

After the need for a guide has been properly authenticated, the next step in assuring that it will be used by teachers is to develop the contents in an effective manner. At this stage, such considerations as these are important:

1. Be sure that the committee assigned the job is representative of the best talent and experience available.
2. Involve as many teachers as is practical in offering suggestions.
3. Provide teachers and others concerned with progress reports. In this way, potential users of the publication will have an opportunity to express reactions. At the same time, they will develop an interest in its success, particularly when some of their suggestions are utilized.

4. Produce the guide for the same generation of teachers who asked for it. Naturally the value of a publication will be diluted if the development process takes so long that the staff members who expressed an interest in the first place have forgotten the project or gone on to other assignments.

5. Remember that economy measures in printing may not be enough. Particularly when the budget is tight and money is needed for teacher salaries, be sure that the guide when published not only is produced inexpensively but also looks it. At first glance, this guideline may sound superfluous. Yet, a publication which really was printed inexpensively can cause all kinds of argument and opposition simply because teachers are sometimes ignorant of printing techniques.

A good example was an algebra guide published several years ago by a mid-western school system. A controversy arose when some teachers charged that "too much money was spent in making the publication look fancy." On investigation, it was determined that a photograph had been printed on the cover in two shades of green ink. The cover had been reproduced by offset in a single color. Through use of the Ben Day process, the two shades could be used to make the cover more attractive at no additional cost.

When administrators and curriculum supervisors discuss the use of a guide in the classroom, however, the chief problem with which they are concerned is presentation of the material to teachers in a way that the investment in development and printing will pay off. This part of the process can well be the "weakest link" in the curriculum guide cycle, for, if it is not handled properly, the publication will be of reduced value even though it may be of high caliber. The problems differ markedly not only with the kind of publication but also with the size of the school system and the effectiveness of channels of communication.

Introducing the Guide

In almost every situation, nevertheless, such guidelines as these will be successful in helping to remove that "weakest link":

1. Select the persons who will present the publication with particular care. If possible, they should be individuals who have shared in the development, who can point out the need for and value of the guide, and who are prepared to answer questions or reply to criticisms. They should be enthusiastic and knowledgeable. If the school system is too large to permit the developers to introduce the guide, a representative from each school should meet with them for orientation and instructions. When each representative later undertakes the task, the principal should make the preliminary introduction.

a. In the elementary school, the teacher who follows up probably will be a faculty chairman. If properly selected and trained, he can be an effective "middle man" not only because he has been properly oriented concerning the guide but also because he is accepted by his associates. He will have a practical understanding of how the guide will be useful.

b. In junior and senior high schools, the person who performs this function

may well be the department chairman, if he has the qualifications and also is properly prepared for the task.

2. Be sure that the presentation—at whatever level—is made directly to the teachers who will use the publication. A curriculum guide should never be introduced simply by placing it in a teacher's mail box.

3. Make arrangements for the persons who present a guide to have the materials which they need to do the job. For example, an "introduction" kit may be developed. It might include an outline indicating the importance of the publication and how it will assist the teacher; a two-page summary, which also can be distributed to principals and other key personnel; a marked copy to indicate highlights; and a list of resources to supplement the guide.

4. Gear the presentation approach to the type of guide. Avoid reading from the publication itself or making the introduction longer than necessary.

5. In arranging schedules, take into consideration the timing of presentations. Teachers will be more receptive at certain times than at others.

6. Initially, distribute only sample copies to schools. Provide principals and faculty chairmen or department chairmen with a tear-off order form so that only the copies which actually are needed will be sent to the schools within the distribution quotas established.

7. Make provision for teachers to discard or return to the central office materials which are no longer needed as a result of the introduction of the new guide. Although teachers should be permitted to retain publications which they consider to be useful, their closets should not be allowed to become curriculum cemeteries.

8. Provide teachers who receive the publication with an opportunity to evaluate it. An appraisal form should accompany each copy. However, to be effective, such a form should be prepared to make the teacher's task easier and also to simplify the job of tabulating responses. Often, a one-page check list is suitable. Three levels of appraisal, such as "not as much," "the same as," and "more than," may be desirable. "Group" evaluations often are more useful than responses by individual teachers.

9. When possible, follow up the presentation of a guide with workshops or other types of in-service training which will help teachers use the material successfully. In small districts, of course, a new guide can be introduced effectively in workshops.

In reviewing the whole cycle of curriculum development, supervisors and administrators will find that the responsibility of "making something happen" in the classroom requires their best efforts. After all, it is on improvement that the strength and future of the educational program—and of the welfare of pupils—must depend. Presentation of a curriculum guide which will make a contribution to instruction is not only a privilege and opportunity but also an acid test of leadership. ☞

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