

Curriculum Negotiation: How? To What Extent?

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WE CAN no longer refer to negotiation in education as a new development. It has been with us for several years. In the beginning there was a scarcity of literature and human resources on the subject. Educators turned to labor-management resources for help. It is not surprising that collective bargaining has been the mode and we give only lip service to professional negotiation.

One of the great debates since the advent of negotiations has been in regard to what is negotiable. It is now apparent that such a debate is fruitless and can only serve as exercise in mental gymnastics. Most state laws are quite clear and some have been tested in court. Laws that are patterned after the collective bargaining model in the labor management field are pointedly clear. All matters that affect employee wages, hours, and conditions of employment are negotiable. The current and future status of curriculum in this era of bargaining poses a serious problem.

Curriculum in Negotiation?

The experts claim that the criterion for determining a good master contract is whether or not the contract is mutually unsatisfactory to both sides. Should this be the fate of curriculum? Is this what we want for young people? Does curriculum lend it-

self to adversary relationships, confrontation, two-sided table bargaining, compromise, and mutual dissatisfaction? The answer to all these questions should be a resounding *no*. We should not put our hope in new legislation or litigation that is designed to restrict. It is very possible that improved legislation might make a positive contribution, but it certainly is not the answer. To restrict or reverse present legislation would probably not be any more acceptable to teachers than present legislation is to administrators and board members.

The real answer lies within us. We must decide what we really want to do as professionals and where we want to go as a profession. Is our goal to "beat the other guy" or "restrict the other guy"? Our ends and the good of young people might better be served if we worked to do away with "the other guy" concept. We call ourselves professionals. We call our business a professional enterprise. We call our collective bargaining professional negotiation.

We have used the term "professional" quite loosely in that we do not know exactly what we mean by the term. Furthermore, much of our behavior belies the term when compared to behavior in recognized profes-

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sions. If we need to "come of age" in this regard, why not start with curriculum negotiation?

A new approach might enable us to prove to ourselves and to others that we are in a profession and that we can behave professionally.

Nature of Curriculum Development

It is extremely difficult to accept any rationale for subjecting curriculum to the negotiation area. Advocates of curriculum negotiation are "copping out" and not facing the challenge. On salaries, the adversaries can each take a firm position on dollar figures and the positions can be battled and compromised in a collective bargaining setting. Can or should this be done with curriculum and curricular related matters?

Perhaps analyzing the nature of curriculum development activities might help answer the question. We do know that curriculum development efforts should be continuous since they represent a study and growth process. The process evolves and becomes richer through new input, interaction, tryout, and redesign efforts. The very nature of the study process results in continual modification and change. If there ever is an end product it is tentative and subject to change.

We also know that all professional staff members who are to be affected by curriculum decisions should be involved in the curriculum decision-making process. The quality of curriculum development efforts is directly related to the input and the mix of human and material resources brought to bear on curricular issues. The best curriculum products result from the deliberations of professional people representing a variety of roles with various backgrounds of experience.

The pressures for improved instruction and accountability have never been greater. Within our ranks we have the competencies and the know-how to meet these challenges. However, it cannot be done unless we mobilize the resources available to us and concentrate our efforts on a cooperative basis. To improve instruction it is essential that

staff members function as co-professionals rather than as adversaries.

A Professional Approach

It might be helpful to consider what a professional approach is *not*. It does not involve adversary relationships. It does not lend itself to collective bargaining tactics. It should not result in compromise. It should not be a matter of choosing sides. A professional approach must allow for a free, open contest of ideas. It should also draw upon representation of staff members from a variety of roles. A good mix of backgrounds, expertise, and viewpoints *can* result in improved products.

Professionals must be guided by common goals and must constantly remind themselves who is to be the beneficiary of their efforts. In our business the young people are the beneficiaries of our curriculum efforts—not the teacher or the administrator or the board. We must have a community of purpose. How else can a professional staff member be free to innovate, to be creative, or to be flexible within a curricular structure? The real dangers of a negotiated master contract lie in the restrictions that it places on professional choice and professional freedom. We should be striving for master teachers—not contracts that master teachers.

A second negotiation group should be established, involving representatives of the total professional staff, to deal with curriculum issues and problems. The curriculum negotiation group should restrict its agreements to the process and design for seeking solutions. The agreements should clearly specify who is to be involved, the decision-making procedures, realistic timetables for completion of tasks, time for staff members to work on the tasks, the controls necessary to ensure continued progress, provisions for evaluation, and provisions for accountability.

Inherent Problems

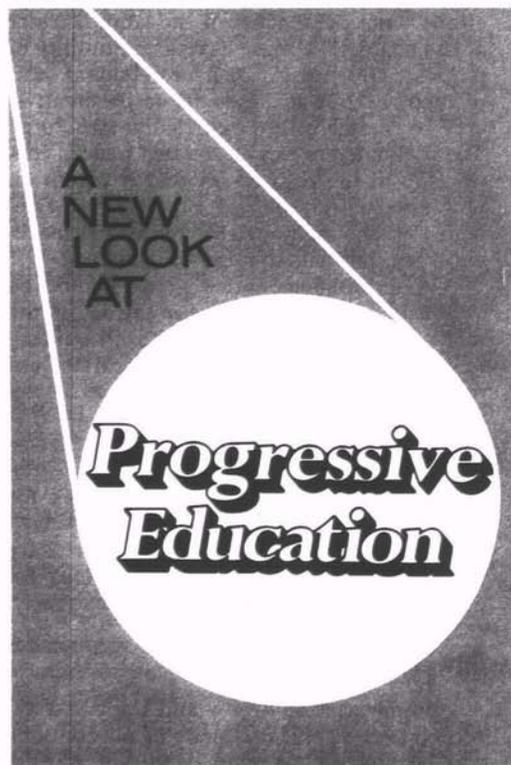
Implementing a new and improved approach in the present climate of negotiations will be difficult. A high degree of mutual

faith, trust, and respect between and among professional staff members is basic to improved working relationships. It would probably be safe to say that those conditions currently do not exist at a high level. However, we must be willing to gamble. Each of us must contribute to the improvement of these conditions. Teacher organizations accurately view their rights to negotiate as new power that has led to many gains in areas of welfare and job security. To back off from that position of strength is not necessary, but refraining from its utilization in regard to curriculum at the "table" is necessary.

Many groups within the field of education have been operating as self-interest groups through the negotiation mechanism. This splintering has not and will not make a positive contribution to unification of the profession. In fact, it has had the reverse

effect. The community of interest rationale that defines bargaining groups must give way to a community of purpose rationale on the issues of curriculum and instruction. This represents the real challenge. It can be met successfully through the development of power relationships that are more consistent with and more adequate for the complex nature of the education process. Each of us should say to himself—if it is to be, it is up to me.

The one quality that has not characterized enough members of our profession is willingness to take risks. Perhaps now is the time for us all to become risk takers. In regard to curriculum negotiations, it is very possible that we have everything to gain and nothing to lose. More important, young people would obviously gain—and after all, aren't they the reason that we exist? □



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