

Community Involvement in Curriculum

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CURRENT forces and movements in American education could result in sharply opposed practices regarding community involvement in curriculum. The impact of current movements toward greater efficiency and accountability in education could move significant responsibilities for curriculum development away from the individual school and even the school district. A systems approach to curriculum development could create curriculum-designing units serving several schools and school districts. State and national assessment programs could be reflected in criteria for local curriculums. Centralization of school financing could result in increasing control over curriculum by the central fiscal power. Performance contracts could give some curriculum and instruction responsibilities of the local school and district to outside contractors.

Forces aiming at valid and important purposes may tend to cloud the identity of the school community and inhibit the active participation in curriculum development of parents and citizens served by individual schools: elimination of neighborhood schools to achieve racially balanced school populations; creation of metropolitan school districts to equalize educational opportunity; school-without-walls organizations to utilize resources of urban areas.

Yet even in some of these movements there are opportunities for community emphases and involvement. Thus, the school-without-walls notion simply moves students into a wider community. Systems planning and centralized financing and even larger school districts could provide for more organized local community participation than now generally exists. Even the elimination of neighborhood schools could result in the use of more representative community councils.

Perhaps the only development that would truly eliminate the possibility of organized community involvement is the elimination of the public school structure itself. And the impact of today's advocates of deschooling and disestablishment seems more than balanced by public opinion and governmental actions supporting the schools but demanding their improvement and accountability. These demands in many ways call for and support community involvement plans such as those described in this issue.

Some Lessons from the Past?

The history of curriculum development in the past 50 years is replete with efforts toward community involvement both in decision making about the curriculum plan and

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in providing resources and agenda for it. The various community school movements, the use of school-community councils of several types, lay participation in curriculum development programs and projects, cooperative work-experience programs, community study and service efforts, widespread utilization of community resources, even community-centered curriculum designs, have long been urged and also reported in curriculum writings. Yet such current efforts are sometimes hailed as new or revolutionary, and genuine community involvement seems widely lacking. Not only, it sometimes seems, are educators unaware of the antecedents of current practice, but they may be ignoring principles that could be perennial. Two such principles are suggested here.

● *First, community involvement is most widespread and effective when the issues are real and personal.* Parents are concerned about the educational progress of their own children. People in general are concerned about the goals of their schools, what and how well the schools do to achieve them, and what education costs. They become concerned about specific curriculum issues, building plans, teacher salaries, and zoning arrangements as these matters touch on their primary concerns. Successful community involvement efforts have focused on primary concerns.

When the people of communities in the South were faced with the problems of a greatly depressed economy in the 1930's, they even went to school with their children to learn to cope with the real problems of unemployment, food preservation, and nutrition. Victory Gardens and Corps, salvage and rationing, wartime preinduction, and manpower training programs were vigorously supported in World War II. The turns to emphases on national defense priorities, physical fitness, compensatory education, and other highly publicized social needs have

usually been accompanied by strong community support. On the other side of the coin, teacher and student strikes, bussing and other population shifts, sex education, drug abuse, and violence have also aroused community groups. Participation in the usual types of curriculum study groups has been of less interest.

● *Second, community involvement is most real and personal at the individual school level.* Seeking full participatory representation in educational decision making in Battle Creek, Michigan, in the late 1940's, Superintendent Virgil M. Rogers organized an Educational Advisory Council with two lay representatives (president of the school PTA and one other parent of the opposite sex) of each school in the city. This predominantly lay organization paralleled a curriculum council including one teacher representative from each school.

Although today one might prefer to merge these organizations, we found that they worked well in Battle Creek then, especially as communication channels between the schools. Review of various types of councils operating elsewhere during the past 25 years confirms my belief that district-wide organizations not based on individual school representation tend to lack the vitality and problem-solving focus of such representative councils.

These observations lead this writer to conclude that the starting point for effective community involvement in curriculum development is in the real and personal concerns of parents and other persons in relation to a particular school. Whether its students live in the neighborhood or are bussed in from a rural area or across the city, the population is defined and its parents can be identified and consulted. They can be organized through homerooms, teams, grades, or other arrangements into groups from which can be drawn agenda items of concern.

As these agenda items are pursued and agreements, disagreements, and recommendations noted, channels for communication with other schools and other decision-making groups can be developed and utilized. Plans can also be made for involving students at appropriate levels.

Some Items for the Agenda

Perhaps past difficulties in securing community involvement in curriculum have been due to the preoccupation of curriculum development with curriculum content which parents expect the schools to teach but in which they themselves have little interest. Interest and involvement seem highest when the content is related to enterprises, activities, problems, and concerns at hand. Instead of trying to involve laymen in planning the scope and sequence of the curriculum as it has been, we should seek their aid in designing curriculum opportunities of greater interest to them and more relevant to students.

Esoteric goals arouse little interest, but the central goal of developing the self-directing, continuing learner can be made meaningful and attractive. Large numbers of adults today face the necessity of continuing education. Translation of this goal into a curriculum domain of continued learning skills could well utilize the full cooperation of parents at home and of all the community resource services in which learning skills are acquired and practiced—libraries, television and radio stations, newspapers, theaters, museums. Could each school have a council on continued learning skills seeking the guidance of community educative agencies as to skills to be taught in school, and the help of all participants in maximizing the development and continued use of skills needed in learning outside school?

The goal of personal development is one for which home and school have an especially direct and heavy responsibility. A school advisory committee in this domain could utilize many nonschool resources in planning for health and physical development in and out of school, for school and out-of-school counseling and other special services, and

especially for goal setting and curriculum planning in the important and neglected areas of values and valuing processes.

The curriculum domain of human relations in particular requires extensive community involvement. Already some human relations councils have been quite effective in facilitating adjustment of changing populations. Can they also give guidance to school faculties in planning curriculum opportunities for study and even resolution of human relations problems within the school and community? Help is needed in selecting appropriate content in the social sciences and humanities, in arranging for interaction in school and community of persons with varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and in planning for effective participation of older students in the various social enterprises of the community.

The broad domain of specialization already utilizes a variety of out-of-school resources in many school districts, especially in vocational education and other work-experience programs. Community schools of the past and metropolitan schools-without-walls of the present differ primarily in their locales; the former brought the community into the school and the latter take the school into the community. Both approaches are desirable, with wise planning needed to achieve efficient use of maximum resources so that each student may have opportunity to explore the areas of career and self-development most appropriate to him.

At least at the high school level a council on community educational opportunities, perhaps operating through subcommittees in each area of specialized interest—in the arts, service areas, occupations, and other categories—could work for extension of educational opportunities for all students. In time such councils might become the prototypes for new boards of community education responsible for coordinating complete educational services for all children and adults of the community.

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