

Rights, Responsibilities, and Curriculum

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Solution to the problem of involvement, since that is what the issue of rights and responsibilities is all about, lies in the establishment of a basic philosophical commitment to an educational program broadly conceived and developed in each community by educators, laymen, and students.

IN RECENT years harried and harassed public school administrators, college deans and presidents have been hastily reacting, adjusting, accommodating, or simply giving in to pressures applied both internally and externally. Such pressures have come from a seemingly endless parade of groups equally strident in their demands for change, representation, or relief from a variety of wrongs real or imagined.

Since line administrators have been in the forefront bearing the brunt of these pressures, many of them feel that curriculum specialists and curriculum workers have been effectively shielded from such strife and turmoil and, consequently, have lost a measure of credibility from those who would use their consultation or services. This apparent paradox has existed on many college campuses,

where faculty members at times joined forces with or gave tacit approval to militant groups demonstrating for broader representation or increased rights.

The dichotomy is also apparent in the public school sector where militancy in teacher organizations has been a contributor to unrest and confusion, and has placed boards of education and administrators in a defensive posture. Negotiated agreements hammered out at the bargaining table substitute for professional decisions in curriculum matters.

Operating in this climate, the public schools today represent more than ever before a microcosm of society and reflect in their operations the current unrest and uncertainty existing about them. Upon superficial examination, one might believe that schools generally have undergone remarkable changes resulting from the clamor for student rights. The adjustments, however, have too often been in response to court judgments or litigation and have treated only symptoms rather than root causes. The abolition of dress codes, dropping of hair style regulations, granting greater freedom and increasing informality in the school setting have all contributed to a more relaxed atmosphere. The recognition that due process is for stu-

dents and teachers as well has also affected school policies and regulations, but these changes have had little significant impact upon the curriculum or teaching in most schools.

Although the response of schools to the need for change has been disappointing, there are indications of a groundswell of awareness and concern on the part of school faculties that the educational institutions as we know them are in danger of obsolescence. Teachers are becoming increasingly distressed by the alienation in the classroom as evidenced by indifference, boredom, or outright rebellion. Here and there we see faculties eagerly adopting new programs or innovations that might aid them in their search for a panacea to cure their educational ills.

Why Do Programs Fail?

Failure of many innovative programs instituted in recent years may be attributed to their piecemeal approach or the lack of significant involvement of teachers, students, and community in the search for solutions to the complex problems facing schools. Flexible scheduling programs have often met parental resistance, and in some cases, faculty opposition because of the increased freedom of students unaccompanied by commensurate responsibility. Typically, where these programs failed, there was a lack of adequate staffing, physical facilities, or financial support for in-service training, paraprofessionals, and other necessary resources.

Demands for open campus privileges by students to escape the confining environment of the traditional school setting have also met with opposition in many areas. Schools that have attempted to solve this problem are accused of shirking their responsibilities and neglecting their traditional custodial function.

Individualized education emphasizing diagnosis and prescription, continuous progress, and differentiated staff roles has too often been characterized by an impersonalized packaged learning program accompanied by drudgery and narrow unimaginative approaches to teaching and learning.

Photos courtesy of the author



Teachers on extended contract meet with administrators in summer workshops to develop long-range plans.

If school faculties and parents appear apathetic, suspicious, or reserve judgment concerning the most recent nostrums concocted by educational innovators, they can scarcely be blamed. An examination of the schools' response or reactions to the series of crises or problems since the 50's reveals a woeful lack of solidarity or commitment to any fundamental principles. Sputnik and Conant, patriotism and McCarthy, rebellion and Hayakawa, career education and Marland—each new crisis has seen the schools or legislatures respond to the simple solution or follow the popular lead of the most visible advocate of a program.

The time is long past due for curriculum specialists, classroom teachers, and leaders of broad segments of society to take a fresh look at education in America, its place in society, future directions it might take, and to assess not only rights of students but to define and assign responsibility or accountability where it belongs in the scheme of broad educational policy.

Education has been established by the courts as a right for all rather than a privilege, and school systems are struggling with the legal implications and new operational procedures attendant upon this right. It is imperative, therefore, that we include this most recently emancipated cross section of the school community in a whole new series of relationships. Although we have addressed ourselves to the hard-won rights of students, we have yet to devise methods or

techniques of imposing a higher degree of responsibility and involvement upon the student that is in some measure commensurate with those rights. While the student was simply the passive recipient of arbitrary rules, regulations, or programs, his commitment to or acceptance of them was a matter of personal choice.

The right to an educational program that fits the need of each learner has received lip service for generations. Our past offerings, however, have been almost exclusively tailored for the highly verbal, more gifted college-bound students. Small wonder that the more militant members of our constitu-



Students, parents, teachers, and board members work to develop philosophy and goals for the school district.



The student advisory board of education is represented at every regular board meeting.

ency came from other groups purported to be served by the school system, or that vocationally-oriented students simply tolerated the larger part of our curriculum.

It appears that the solution to the problem of involvement, since that is what the issue of rights and responsibilities is all about, lies in the establishment of a basic philosophical commitment to an educational program broadly conceived and developed in each community by educators, laymen, and students. This philosophical base should then serve as a foundation for development of broad achievable educational goals for that school system. Each element of the educational community, every building, every staff member, each parent and student must be aware of these broad parameters within which the success of the school is to be measured and evaluated. The statement of missions and goals should become a working

document to serve as the basis for the development of all aspects of the educational program. Invariably, schools successful in achieving fundamental and lasting changes or innovations have implemented techniques for wide involvement in each step of the planning process.

Success Through Involvement

An outstanding case study which illustrates the effectiveness of shared responsibility in decision making, staff involvement, and attention to the processes of goal setting and planning is in operation at Westbrook Junior High School, Westside Community Schools, Omaha, Nebraska. The administration and staff at this 550 student school first accepted the stated philosophy and goals of the school district, which were first of all cooperatively developed by students, professional staff, and lay citizens. The school proceeded then to develop its own unique program to fulfill the commitment to an individualized and humane educational program.

Working committees revised definitions, operational procedures, and curriculum plans in order that the staff might better internalize or conceptualize implications for long-range planning and meaningful involvement. Each aspect of the school program was evaluated in terms of appropriateness and consistency with the stated philosophy and goals. The master schedule, staff organization, pupil evaluation and reporting systems, course

offerings, teaching methodology, and school regulations were all subject to examination.

What has happened as a result of this process? The school has accomplished a complete turnabout from a highly traditional regimented school to an open, dynamic, and exciting place where the individual student and his or her needs are the primary consideration in all decision making. Basic to the everyday operation of the school is the teacher guide system where every staff member, including the principal, is responsible for a small group of students for scheduling independent time, for educational planning, and for conducting quarterly pupil-teacher-parent conferences to substitute for the traditional report card. Remarkably, 100 percent of the parents participated in the first series of these three-way conferences last fall.

A second major feature has been the reorganization of the school curriculum to provide more options under a quarter system. The introduction of new programs in the humanities, theater arts, calculators and computers, photography, and a variety of independent study opportunities in academic areas was made possible. These experiences have traditionally been reserved for study in senior high or later. Of necessity, the staff is continuing to define what is basic in academic areas, and developing measurable objectives to be met by all.

Earned-responsibility passes for approximately 20 percent of the student body permit them to pursue activities during unscheduled time. Student demand scheduling will allow these students to set their own schedules and time patterns with teacher advisor approval so that they can fulfill obligations in individualized continuous progress programs in mathematics, science, reading, typing, and practical arts.

Demonstrated student responsibility is essential prior to granting further rights or privileges for students. The system granting one fifth of a junior high student body the right to responsibility passes and freedom to determine their daily schedule contrasts sharply with those secondary schools still wedded to a lockstep system or those whose faculties have shirked their responsibilities

and granted *carte blanche* freedom to all students whether earned or deserved. It would seem that the softness characteristic of the schools advocating the principle of "free time" shows a lack of concern or an indifference that is psychologically as damaging as the regimented school.

The key elements apparent in changing school programs in a significant way all focus upon involvement and increased responsibilities for students, staff, and parents. Differentiated staff roles providing for new leadership responsibilities, parent advisory committees for consultation and reaction, and regular student evaluation of the program are all equally essential. The board of education incorporated the goals into policy and mandated that the staff implement the goals through a system of evaluation and long-range planning.

Individualized schools within the school system making the most significant progress toward goal achievement are all committed to the same process of change.

While the Westbrook program has experienced the most dramatic changes in overall programs, all schools within the system are moving in like directions. Teacher advisors, individualized systems, and differentiated staffing are implemented in all schools.

The implications for curriculum workers are clear. Their skills must be sharpened in the areas of human relations and involvement. Whether located in the central office or another agency, the outside expert has little effect on programs. When schools embark on the road toward change utilizing the kind of professional leadership available in every building, when parents and students become actively involved in the process as well, really significant things begin to happen. Creativity is freed and leadership emerges.

In those schools where the momentum toward satisfaction of personal and professional goals is rapidly increasing, the tradition oriented curriculum worker's primary charge is to get out of the way.

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