

HOW FARES CURRICULUM IN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING?

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Teachers, as professional persons, have a unique contribution to make in shaping the way in which curriculum content is presented in the school system. Whether their contribution can best be made through the adversarial setting of the bargaining table is questioned here.

THE mere thought of teachers bargaining with their boards of education on matters affecting curriculum is anathema to the super-professionals in education. They say that the content of the course of study is a "professional" matter, or a matter for determination by properly designated representatives of society: school boards, administrators, and state departments of education, particularly. Allowing a teacher bargaining agent to get into the process introduces an element of coercion which smacks of censorship and could open the way to indoctrination of students, they say.

However, it seems to me that while no special interest group should have *control* of curriculum content, the firsthand experience and professional judgment of teachers are invaluable resources which should be utilized in curriculum development and revision. Certainly the *process* by which curriculum is determined must be bargainable to make sure that teachers are represented.

As for curriculum *content*, this should

also be bargainable as to the correction of egregious omissions or the elimination of irrelevant or inappropriate course content. The hand-picked "safe" curriculum committee is still with us in many school districts and so is the "safe"—and dull—curriculum. Making curriculum bargainable within limits can serve as a check on the normal bureaucratic process.

Teachers Must Be Involved

In other words, teachers must be involved in curriculum development and revision as a professional right and obligation. Many years ago I pointed out that a teachers' union must have a broader function than a union in the private production sector. Teachers are professionals—or aspiring professionals, at least. Since the essence of professionalism is the exercise of one's skilled judgment in the performance of one's work, the union must represent the collective judgment of its members in matters which in private production are conceded to be the exclusive prerogative of management.

In the private sector, unions seldom attempt to bargain on the process of production and product design. In education, to shrug off such questions would be a denial of professional status.

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Charles Cogen, President of the American Federation of Teachers from 1964 to 1968, put it this way:

We would place no limit on the scope of negotiations—the items which are subject to the bargaining process. Anything on which the two parties can agree should become a part of the agreement: anything on which they cannot agree will, of course, not appear.

I look for a great expansion in the effective scope of negotiations. . . . Obviously, class sizes,

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number of classes taught, curriculum, hiring standards, textbooks and supplies, extracurricular activities—in fact anything having to do with the operation of the school is a matter for professional concern and should thus be subject to collective bargaining.

I suppose no one would quarrel with the assertion that when teachers are involved in curriculum development and revision they should be selected by their colleagues, rather than hand-picked by an administrator. Many contracts negotiated by AFT locals, and by NEA locals as well, provide for educational policies committees which, among other duties, give consideration to curriculum matters. The AFT contract in Park Forest, Illinois, for instance, calls for such a committee, with the following clause under “Section 1, Educational Development Committee”:

h. The Board shall not introduce any change in curriculum or new teaching method or material or approve any plans for new school construction or major remodeling or any other matter pertaining to the improvement of the educational programs in District #163 schools, unless the Committee shall have been consulted and its opinion considered. The Board shall not implement policies which are contrary to the recommendations of the Educational Development Committee. In the event that the Board

implements a policy without consulting the Committee or which is contrary to the recommendations of the Committee, the full Board and Educational Development Committee shall meet together to reconcile differences. If a satisfactory solution to the problem is not reached the Union shall have the right to take the matter to the fourth step of the grievance procedure as provided herein.

Incidentally, the Park Forest wording is much tougher than that in the usual curriculum clause. Most of them call only for “consultation” with no enforcement machinery. This section from the contract in nearby East Chicago, Indiana, is typical:

Article XX. Policy Formation

1. The teacher shall have a voice in all educational matters affecting his classroom and shall be consulted, through departmental meetings, in the preliminary stages of planning any curriculum changes, new materials including textbooks, new equipment, new techniques, and/or building construction or remodeling which directly affects his teaching specialty.

2. The composition of citywide committees studying, reviewing, and developing educational goals shall be such that the non-teacher personnel shall not exceed the number of teachers.

3. The Union shall have the right to designate its representatives to each of the above mentioned committees.

4. In creating rosters for these educational planning and study committees, the Union shall select and provide the teachers to serve. In selecting teachers to serve on these committees, the Union shall make maximum use of talents of all teachers.¹

So much for process. The curriculum committee structure allows for infinite variations in form and substance. Neither the Association nor the Federation tries to tell teachers what form they should seek.

Where Omissions Exist

Earlier in this piece, I staked out a claim on negotiating *content* where egregiously inappropriate omissions or inclusions exist. For

¹ AFT *Negotiations Manual*. Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1975.

instance, the early days of teacher collective bargaining in the early 1960's coincided with the beginnings of civil rights activity. Few curricula included black history and other civil rights education. It was therefore quite natural for many teacher bargaining agents to insist that school management catch up with the times.

In Detroit under a section titled "Quality Integrated Education," the contract calls for detailed revision of curriculum content. Consider the following clauses:

A. Textbook and Curriculum Improvement

1. In order to meet the real and vital learning needs of children in this multiracial, multireligious, multiethnic society in which we live, textbooks and other curriculum material for each pupil in all classes shall be used pursuant to the guidelines established by the Board and outlined in the 1968 Textbook Report, Publication 1-112, or its successor, prepared by the Intergroup Relations Department of the Division of School-Community Relations.

2. Use of textbooks and other curriculum material for each pupil in all American history classes in order to cover in depth the contribution of Negro and other minority groups in each unit taught; and inclusion of such material as part of the course of study in Curriculum Guides.

3. Use of supplemental reading materials dealing with Negro and other minority group contributions, e.g., Jews, Chinese, and American Indians.

4. Use of comprehensive units in world history which cover African, Asian, and Latin American history at appropriate grade levels.

5. The TV series "Americans from Africa" shall continue with appropriate modifications and teachers shall be encouraged to utilize the program.

B. Institute of Afro-American Life and History

In order to provide students and teachers with an expanding and realistic framework relevant to Afro-American history and culture and to more fully develop resources for the adequate study and treatment thereof, an Institute of Afro-American Life and History is being established by the Board through the Division of School-Community Relations and the Office for the Improvement of Instruction. This Institute

shall also compile and disseminate Afro-American historical and cultural materials to all teachers in all subject areas and grade levels in the Detroit Public Schools.

1. A Joint Union-Administration Committee shall be formed to work with those colleges of education which are willing to cooperate in planning a required course of study geared toward understanding and working with children with cultural differences.²

Lately, the hottest curriculum content area in negotiations has been revision to include women's rights. School management is often quite resistant to incorporating the new attitudes about women into the curriculum. Consequently, both national teacher organizations advocate inclusion in the contract of directives filling in this content gap.

A Shield Against Coercion

From the foregoing it is apparent that teacher organizations are using the bargaining process to influence curriculum. Even though I very much approve, the use of an essentially adversary device in a sensitive area like curriculum determination is bound to make civil libertarians, of which I am one, a bit uneasy. Where there is coercive power there is the potential for abuse, and I do not have a "stopper" to allay such fears. All I can say is that we must be aware of the need as well as the danger and proceed with due caution.

After all, no curriculum is devised out of pure, broad concern for the welfare of children or society. Legislatures have repeatedly passed laws about curriculum content the main purpose of which has been the glorification of the politicians who are able to get their bills passed. Business interests work assiduously, and quite successfully, to insert their propaganda into the classroom. The entry of teachers into the curriculum area might be the best available shield against such coercive power.

When teachers have the energy, concern, and vision to step into the vital question of what shall be taught, we should make every effort to encourage them. □

² *Ibid.*

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