HOW FARES CURRICULUM IN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING?

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, 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.

"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 Omissions Exist

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

instance, the early days of teacher collective bargaining in the early 1960s 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, multi-ethnic 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.

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.