What factors have greatest impact on the high school programs? What curricular arrangements and subjects are in vogue? What scheduling patterns and evaluations are used? These and other data-based findings are reported here.

The purposes and programs of high schools have been a continuing source of debate among educators. In the past few years several groups have convened to study this problem and once again press for improvement of high schools. Among these are the Kettering Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the USOE National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education.¹ Most recently the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development has formed a working group to consider new directions in secondary education. No doubt these groups are receiving mixed reactions ranging from a feeling that their work is long overdue to one that high schools have been up-dating and improving themselves continuously.

Recommendations for improving high schools are certainly not new. Beginning with the "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education"² numerous examples can be found in the literature, highlighted by the work of Alberty and Alberty.³ Consistently these authors have pleaded the case for a balanced curriculum to meet the numerous goals of secondary education. They have also questioned many curriculum-related practices still common in high schools.⁴ Certainly many educators felt that student

¹ The work of these groups has been summarized by: Gordon Cavelti. Vitalizing the High School. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1974.


* James A. Beane, Assistant Professor of Education, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, New York.
demands in the late 1960's might finally lead to a revitalization, if not reorganization, of the high school curriculum.

The fact that groups have formed recently to reconsider the high school has reinforced a belief held by many that despite the abundance of literature on reform, schools at this level remain standardized much as they were in the past. However, the emergence of open education at the elementary level and innovations in the middle school may well bring a new kind of pressure in terms of their success. As educators increasingly accept those changes, new demands will be made upon the high schools to follow suit. This attitude in addition to declining enrollment and other factors could possibly increase the chances of reform growing out of the present movements. However, in order to initiate change, we first need a fairly clear understanding of just what the present character of high schools really is.

To assess current curricular trends, practices, and attitudes in high schools a national survey was conducted of 500 randomly selected high schools. The data were gathered in the spring of 1974 under a research grant through St. Bonaventure University. Of the 500 schools surveyed, 232 responded to a questionnaire which included a variety of questions regarding present practices. Responses were made by the principals of those schools and represented rural, suburban, and city districts of varying sizes and locations. The data were tabulated according to the percentage of responses to the various questions.

Current Status of High Schools

The high schools are influenced to varying degrees by several factors. The most influential of these appeared to be local, indicating that school personnel perceived themselves to have as much or more decision-making power as external forces such as colleges and universities or state departments of education (see Figure 1). Furthermore, curriculum planning locally was perceived as being done by professional personnel (teachers and administrators) at the high school level itself with relatively little participation by non-professional groups (citizens and boards of education) or central office personnel (see Figure 2). Despite concerted efforts to increase student involvement in curriculum planning as an outgrowth of late 1960's activity, this group also appears to have considerably less influence than professionals.

The predominant curricular arrangements identified as characterizing the high schools were subjects (96.2 percent) and departmentalization (82.5 percent). Beyond those two, only vocational preparation (67.1 percent) was indicated to any significant or consistent degree (see Figure 3). Furthermore, the four traditional academic areas of English-Language arts (99.1 percent), social studies (97.4 percent), mathematics (92.6 percent), science (91.8 percent), and physical education (92.6 percent) dominated the subjects required for graduation from high school (see Figure 4).

The majority of respondents indicated that letter grades (86.3 percent) and grade point averages (61.4 percent) are used for reporting student achievement while other types were mentioned much less frequently (see Figure 5). The largest proportion also reported that Carnegie or standard period scheduling (88.8 percent) is used while other scheduling patterns were indicated by far less respondents (see Figure 6).

During the past five years modern language courses (18.5 percent) and advanced academic programs (16.4 percent) were dropped or cut back by more schools than were other courses or programs. The greatest growth in terms of additions or program expansion was in the areas of electives (40.1 percent) and vocational education (23.3 percent) while other areas remained apparently stable (see Figure 7).

Finally, respondents indicated that the most significant curriculum changes faced by high schools in the past five years were in the areas of electives (35.9 percent) and vocational education (28.9 percent). Those changes predicted for the next five years are also in the areas of vocational education (38.7 percent) and electives (19.4 percent) although the reversal of their priority should be noted. Beyond those two areas, none other was consistently mentioned by the respondents (see Figure 8).

A Consistent Pattern

Data gathered in this study present a fairly consistent pattern among high schools. Most curricular decisions are made locally by teachers and administrators indicating that the strongest program influence base lies within the schools themselves. The majority of programs are organized around subjects and are departmentalized with relatively few deviations from this pattern. Graduation from high school is also based largely on completion of the requirement in the subject areas of English, social studies, mathematics, science, and physical education. Scheduling of programs is based consistently on Carnegie or standard periods and letter grades, and/or grade point averages are used to report student achievement. Modern language and advanced academic programs have been cut

"Apparently the high schools remain subject to the traditional criticisms made by progressive educators. Data reported here conflict with arguments that the high schools have been in a state of continuous change and up-dating."
balance in the curriculum and research has indicated the need for implementation of these concepts, yet apparently little has been done. The subject-centered curriculum continues to preclude broad efforts toward interdisciplinary programs, student involvement in curriculum planning, independent study, community service projects, and other valuable curriculum components.

### Curricular Arrangement

The table below shows the percentage of respondents indicating various curricular arrangements included in programs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject or Course of Study</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English/Language Arts</td>
<td>99.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>97.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>92.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Education</td>
<td>92.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>91.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver Education</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Language</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Economics</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Arts</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational Education</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Meaning for Reformers

Apparently the high schools remain subject to the traditional criticisms made by progressive educators. Data reported here conflict with arguments that the high schools have been in a state of continuous change and up-dating. While some innovative efforts were reported, the general trend of responses was far less reassuring. Indeed, the call for reform by groups mentioned at the outset has a stronger basis than might have been expected.

Much has been said about variety and...
Type of Report | Percent
---|---
Letter Grades | 86.3
Grade Point Average | 61.4
Numerical Grades | 33.1
Parent-Teacher Conferences | 30.8
Skill/Attitude Checklists | 22.2
Written Evaluations | 15.0

Figure 5. Degree to Which Respondents Indicated Use of Various Patterns of Reporting Student Progress (N = 229)

Scheduling Pattern | Percent | Scheduling Pattern | Percent
---|---|---|---
Carnegie/Standard Periods | 88.8 | Day-Cycle | 12.8
Block-Time | 15.1 | Flexible/Modular | 9.6

Figure 6. Degree to Which Respondents Indicated Use of Various Scheduling Patterns (N = 225)

fore, these two groups should be at the center of re-education programs regarding innovation. In light of local influence, they in turn would seem the logical agents for educating communities and dealing with external pressures.

Finally, reform groups should recognize that they must build on current problem-solving efforts. Such attention has been accurately directed at the elective or mini-course format over the past few years. In addition to that, efforts must now be made through rapidly emerging vocational programs. A broad and consistent definition of "career education" may be the link to developing balance between abstract concepts and practical concerns; between academic and personal, social development; and between academic subjects and societal problems.

As this is done, curriculum planners must carefully re-study theory, practice, and research concerning such areas as core curriculum, unified studies, experience-centered programs, and community-centered units which have been historically peripheral, but which continue to provide sound sources for balance and reform in high school curriculum.

Finally, further data gathering efforts must be conducted in four areas: (a) the perceptions of teachers and administrators which support continuing dominance of traditional programs must be identified; (b) the degree to which colleges and universities, businesses, communities, and other external groups are receptive to change must be measured; (c) local variables which support and sustain innovative programs should be studied; (d) studies on the effects of various curricular patterns on student achievement must be redone or collated for specific high school review. Given this kind of information, reformers can approach their task on a systematic and probable basis.

Course | Dropped/Cutback | Added/Expanded
---|---|---
Dropped/Cutback (Percent) | Added/Expanded (Percent)

Modern Languages | 18.5 | .86
Latin | 10.8 | *
Science | 4.3 | *
Special Subjects | 2.6 | 7.8
Business | 2.2 | 7.0
Agriculture | 1.7 | *
Electives | 6.5 | 40.1
Advanced Academic | 16.4 | 8.2
Open Education | 143 | *
Basic Skills | * | 2.2
Vocational Education | * | 23.3
Social Studies | * | 4.3
No Response | 40.8 | 10.3

* not mentioned in this category

Figure 7. Degree to Which Respondents Indicated Courses Dropped/Cutback and Added/Expanded During the Past Five Years

Change Item | Past 5 Years | Next 5 years
---|---|---
Basic Skills Improvement | 3.5 | 7.7
Vocational Education | 28.9 | 38.7
Scheduling Changes | 6.0 | 7.3
Team Teaching/Non-Grading | 4.3 | *
Individualized Instruction | 3.5 | 5.2
Electives | 35.9 | 19.4
Program Cutsbacks | 4.0 | 3.0
Special Education | 4.0 | *
Minority Education | .86 | *
Expansion of Extracurricular | * | .4
Expansion of Independent Study | * | .8
No Response | 16.4 | 17.2

* not mentioned in this category

Figure 8. Degree to Which Respondents Indicated Areas in Which Significant Curriculum Changes Were Made During the Past Five Years and In Which Significant Change Is Predicted in the Next Five Years

November 1975