

CURRICULUM TRENDS AND PRACTICES IN HIGH SCHOOLS

JAMES A. BEANE*

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

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

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

² Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. Bulletin No. 35. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1918.

³ Harold B. and Elsie J. Alberty. *Reorganizing the High School Curriculum*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962.

⁴ Harold Hand. "For Whom Are the High Schools Designed?" *Educational Leadership* 6 (16): 359-65, March 1949.

* 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.⁵ 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.

⁵ James A. Beane. "Curricular Trends and Practices in High Schools." St. Bonaventure, New York: St. Bonaventure University, Research Grant, Spring 1974.

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

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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

Factor	Percent
Teacher Decisions	93.5
Student Interests	88.8
Administrative Decisions	87.1
College Requirements	87.0
School Philosophy	85.7
State Department Requirements	84.4
Business/Industry Expectations	59.6
Contemporary Social Issues	55.1
District Curriculum Guidelines	54.1
Public Pressure	53.2
Textbooks	37.4
Statewide Exams	17.0

Figure 1. Degree to Which Respondents Identified Factors Which Influence High School Programs (N = 232)

Group	Percent	Group	Percent
Teachers	94.3	Students	28.1
Building Administrators	94.3	Board of Education	19.6
Central Office Staff	44.7	Citizens	9.4

Figure 2. Degree to Which Respondents Indicated Involvement of Various Groups in Curriculum Planning (N = 229)

back more than any others in the past five years while expansion has occurred in the areas of electives and vocational education. The latter two also represent the areas in which the most significant curriculum changes took place during that period and in which change will continue to take place. However, their order of priority has reversed, with the most significant change and growth predicted for vocational education.

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

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	Percent
Subjects	96.2
Departmentalization	82.5
Vocational Preparation	67.1
Courses Dealing with Social Studies	48.8
Small Group Instruction	45.3
Student Service Work in Community	25.4
Home-Base Counseling	22.0
Courses or Electives Dealing with Education	19.5
Student Involvement in Classroom Curriculum Planning	19.0
Core, Unified Studies, Humanities	18.6
Large Group Instruction	18.0
Independent Study	17.3
Differentiated Staffing	10.6
Packaged Programs (e.g., BSCS)	10.0
Interdisciplinary Team Teaching	8.2

Figure 3. Degree to Which Respondents Indicated Various Curricular Arrangements Are Included in Programs (N = 231)

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

Figure 4. Degree to Which Respondents Indicated Subjects or Courses of Study Required for High School Graduation (N = 232)

If the efforts of groups promoting change, improvement, and variety in high school programs are to make a difference, they must recognize that even though high schools are influenced by a variety of factors, specific program decision making is dominated by teachers and administrators. There-

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 (Percent)	Added/Expanded (Percent)
Modern Languages	18.5	.86
Latin	10.8	*
Science43	*
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	14.3	*
Basic Skills	*	2.2
Vocational Education ...	*	23.3
Social Studies	*	.43
No Response	40.5	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 Cutbacks4	3.0
Special Education4	*
Minority Education86	*
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

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