

Will the Real Curriculum Players Step Forth?

Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr.



Unfortunately, the cast of the curriculum drama varies considerably from community to community. In districts where the "back-to-basics" or "textbook" vigilantes have seized power, those who make curricular decisions have become increasingly intimidated by the whim and bias of lay pressure groups. In college towns, professorial parents often sway the emphasis of the public school offerings to an elitist, academic imbalance. In more traditional settings, the curriculum is still virtually dictated by the textbooks selected for school use. In even more unfortunate circumstances, the tree of knowledge has all but been defoliated in the name of cutting costs to taxpayers.

The list of difficulties, which is practically endless, underlies the lamentable litany of imbalance characterizing the local curriculum planning process. Industry, private enterprise foundations, federal and state agencies—all are culprits.

Orchestrating Our Resources

While the resources available for curriculum development have multiplied geometrically in recent decades, our capacity to orchestrate effectively these elements—through seeking systematic curriculum balance—has been debilitated. In a majority of situations, curriculum planning has become an accident looking for a place to happen.

A dominant theoretical premise in curriculum development has been that "process is our most important product." However, school district practices seem to reveal that, with the knowledge explosion, we have become fascinated with all but the *planning* process.

Curriculum scholars of the past 40 years have organized models for developing inter-related bases of student-teacher-administrator-citizen decision making to improve learning opportunities. However, conflicts over student rights, teacher power secured through collective negotiation, and community control have shifted concern away from the refinement of planning processes. In short, we appear to have lost "our wheels."

Doing Our Homework

A majority of curriculum workers are guilty of either not doing or forgetting to do

their homework. Educational leaders chide us for not developing planning models to facilitate curriculum improvement. While new models doubtlessly need to be created, or refined from existing ones, far too many of our colleagues are blissfully ignorant of the literature concerning the theory and practice of systematic, cooperative curriculum planning of the past 40 years. Because of this ignorance, far too many attempts have been made to adopt *en masse* industrial and other non-educational process models, which have proven ineffective and unadaptable to the needs of curriculum development.

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Fortunately, one can still find districts that have refined their curriculum development procedures from the literature of our discipline. These districts have been able to cope much more effectively with curriculum development concerns than the school communities that lack such planning mechanisms.

Rediscovering Important Literature

There have been many major contributors to the body of "lost literature." Certainly, Caswell and Campbell¹ in their 1935 volume, *Curriculum Development*, provided detailed consideration of the elements and processes basic to developing systematic curriculum planning procedures. Similarly, Gwynn,² Krug,³ Saylor and Alexander,^{4,5,6} Anderson,⁷ Verduin,⁸ and others all contributed to the accumulation of the basic data we should understand in seeking to articulate a cooperative process of ongoing curriculum development.

It is discouraging that so few contemporary curriculum workers are aware of this vital body of information. Their ignorance leads to dilemmas of non-planning and to unknowing, abortive attempts to "re-invent the wheel." The calamities that result from such situations show that we have only succeeded in "rediscovering the rut."

Facing the Complex Challenge

Developing the necessary means for cooperative curriculum development will require considerable time and effort. To have done so a decade ago would have been less complex because the backlog of critical issues "dogging" our schools was significantly less than it is now.

Where planning mechanisms exist, they have provided a means to improve communication and dialogue and to promote an understanding of how education should be planned most realistically in a district.

This is not to infer that the districts in which planning has been a priority have escaped unscathed from the financial and ideological crunch threatening the educational fabric of the entire nation. However, cooperative planning processes in these districts have provided a means to separate fact from folklore, and responsible from irresponsible concerns. The

¹ Hollis L. Caswell and Doak S. Campbell. *Curriculum Development*. New York: American Book Company, 1935.

² J. Minor Gwynn. *Curriculum Principles and Social Trends*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1943.

³ Edward A. Krug. *Curriculum Planning*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950.

⁴ J. Galen Saylor and William M. Alexander. *Curriculum Planning for Better Teaching and Learning*. New York: Rinehart and Company, 1954.

⁵ J. Galen Saylor and William M. Alexander. *Curriculum Planning for Modern Schools*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966.

⁶ J. Galen Saylor and William M. Alexander. *Planning Curriculum for Schools*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1974.

⁷ Vernon E. Anderson. *Principles and Procedures for Curriculum Improvement*. New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956.

⁸ John R. Verduin, Jr. *Cooperative Curriculum Development*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967.

gaps between lay, professional, and student concerns have been recognized and, through cooperative study and investigation, individuals in forward-looking districts have attained a more realistic understanding of local educational priorities and necessary levels of program support, and have reached greater agreement about these issues.

Encouraging Lay Involvement

The lack of effective lay participation seems common in most districts that are deficient in systematic curriculum development procedures. An increase in lay involvement can occur only when those aspects of curriculum planning in which the public can participate are clearly defined.

Substantially more lay participation is necessary to determine the objectives and scope of curricular programs. Despite the admonitions of curriculum scholars such as those cited earlier, the prevailing practice in the vast majority of American school districts since World War II has been to curtail opportunities for lay participation and, increasingly, to confine decisions exclusively to the realm of professional decision making. This exclusivity has decreased the sense of ownership that parent and lay constituencies tend to exhibit toward school programs.

It makes little sense to retain interest in areas that discourage one's involvement. In the period between 1946 and 1970, lay interest in the curriculum lessened dramatically, but the general growth of the economy and the strength of the tax base supporting the school systems allowed apathy, rather than hostility, to flourish in local communities.

The circumstances that led to the press for community control through decentralization in large, urban school districts in the late 1960's are a prime example of our failure to recognize the need to increase opportunities for lay participation in determining the objectives and scope of the curriculum. Such participation would have helped sensitize teachers and administrators to the realities and demands of life in the community served by the school. Instead, insularity caused oversights that led schools to such poor practices as serving a 90 percent Spanish speaking, Puerto Rican population with

virtually no Spanish speaking teachers on the faculty. The long-standing lack of relevance typified by this and other examples of lay exclusion led to revolts such as the memorable community takeover of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville IS High School 201 in New York City.

While myopia in matters of curriculum decision making has been subsequently recognized in the urban sector, large numbers of suburban and rural districts still fail to recognize their need to involve more effectively their own citizenry in improving the relevance of curriculum to community realities. In all such settings of polarization and isolation of citizens from the curriculum development process, apathy will increase. Moreover, the prospect that apathy will turn to hostility and anger is a serious one, in light of the continuing financial and economic crunch with which school districts and their programs must cope.

Maintaining Professional Prerogatives

Emphasizing lay participation in the curriculum is not to infer that the "how" of professional decision making should be anything other than a carefully specified prerogative. It is because of the isolation of citizens from their proper participation in curriculum development that we face a wholesale inundation of professional decision making by angry community constituencies.

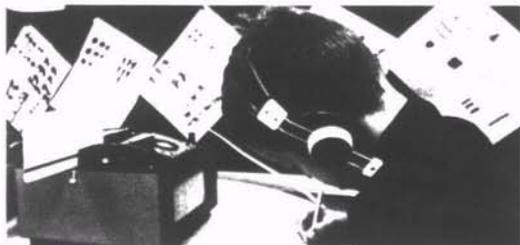
Moreover, we have not witnessed the full swing of the pendulum in this reprisal that now threatens even the necessary balance of teacher and administrator participation in the curriculum development process. There is a mortal threat that professional decision-making prerogatives may be totally taken over by non-professionals.

Ultimately, such a trend could lead to a widespread belief that one need not be a professional educator to work in schools. The probability of such an occurrence is not unrealistic if one observes the assimilation of professional curriculum planning and decision-making responsibilities by the extension of school board policy in growing numbers of districts. In such situations, the resultant, arbitrary elimination of positions, services, and programs means that the case for cooperative, systematic curriculum planning is impossible—just as impossible as in

situations where lay prerogatives have been assimilated by professional decision makers.

Students: Remember Them?

In the hassle over lay *versus* professional prerogatives in curriculum planning, the students seem to have no visibility. Despite the recommendations prevalent in the literature,



Students can help plan the curriculum, says author Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr.—even at the elementary level. Photo: Joe Di Dio, National Education Association.

there is little actual student participation in curriculum development.

Those districts that have successfully initiated pupil-teacher planning activities have also been most successful in involving students in planning the curriculum. While not large in number, instances do exist where successful efforts have been initiated, even with elementary school students.

If we need any reminder of the imperatives for continuing and extending such opportunities in the middle and high school, we need recall nothing more than the apathy, hostility, and dropout rate of American secondary students to validate our ineffectiveness in sensitizing school experiences to the needs and demands of student life. Will it take the demise of compulsory education laws for us to really see how vacant our schools will be on a pure demand basis? It is imperative that we study carefully those districts that have worked to provide and facilitate effective student participation in the curriculum development processes of their schools.

Financial Straitjacket

What dominant rhetoric has compounded the problems stemming from the lack of cooperative, systematic curriculum planning of the post World War II "baby boom"? It is the

rhetoric of "more children, more schools, more money for education"—a simplistic logic that has been taught to the citizens of every growing community in this nation. While this rhetoric was adequate in times of economic and population growth, it is proving highly dangerous to education in today's circumstances of non-growth and the beginnings of zero and negative population growth trends.

In conditioning Americans to accept this rhetoric, we have failed to see the danger inherent in its logic when restrictive rather than expansive conditions become manifest. The maxim's reciprocal, "fewer children, fewer schools, less money for education," is already wreaking havoc in increasing numbers of school districts.

In hindsight, we can now see that a rhetoric urging "more money for increasing the quality and effectiveness of education" would have served the needs of curriculum development much better in times of both expansion and decline. To switch positions and demand increased monies to maintain school programs in this time of national fiscal unrest has already proven largely unsuccessful in gaining public support.

Districts without the capacity for systematic curriculum planning must face this trauma with no mechanism for *strategic* planning. The problems of developing tactical means to survive the fiscal ravaging of school programs in such situations, unfortunately, remain highly localized phenomena. The critical need in such districts is to move to develop the strategic, cooperative, systematic curriculum planning procedures with balanced input, as recommended. Also, districts must simultaneously try to fashion short-term means to cope with the tactical needs to preserve program elements from the floodtide of fiscal calamity.

Perhaps, our greatest gain from current economic problems in education may come from more districts recognizing the need to develop cooperative, systematic curriculum development procedures that will adequately involve students, lay citizenry, teachers, and administrators. This, coupled with the public acceptance of a new logic and possibly a different base for the financial support of education, would be an admirably positive resolution of our present dilemmas.

Achieving Systematic Curriculum Planning

Realistically, we must plan to educate boards of education, communities at large, and professional constituencies as to the need for better curriculum development vehicles. Organizationally, the first step is to develop a systemwide curriculum planning council with community, student, teacher, and administrator membership. The group can initiate curriculum study concerns and consider issues relevant to the objectives and scope of the curriculum. Such a council then reports directly to the chief school officer and the board of education.

The extension of this basic organization can proceed in a number of ways. In some instances, each school within the district can develop such a representative curriculum planning group. Horizontal communication can then be facilitated by the convening of working groups representative of all district elementary schools. Similar organizations can be convened at the middle and high school levels. Vertical communication can be encouraged by convening a representative group from the districtwide elementary, middle, and high school planning organizations. This group can be one that reports to the systemwide curriculum planning council or one that constitutes itself as the systemwide curriculum planning council.

The functioning of such working groups can provide an interface experience with remarkable data-gathering and communicative capabilities. The resulting increased opportunities for student, community, teacher, and administrator understanding of the needs of the school and community are of inestimable value.

The clarification of concerns within and among the participating constituencies is another subtle but critical gain. Likewise, the comprehensive vision of any board of education involved in these activities will strengthen its base of intelligence. With an increased comprehensive understanding of school and community needs, it is also possible for a wide range of specific *ad hoc* groups to be convened and charged with specific functions. The resulting interface of school and community needs and a comprehensive basis for curriculum development is simply not possible in districts lacking an organization for planning. Additional modifications of systemwide planning have been

noted in districts that have organized successful curriculum development procedures. To keep the folklore of the school from being removed from the total community, some meetings of the planning groups are held in community facilities such as fire halls, granges, VFW Posts, and churches.

Another positive approach is to seek the representation of lay citizens, students, and professional educators—all members of the planning committees—on programs of community organizations such as Rotary, Lions, JayCees, Masons, Knights of Columbus, and other groups. Such efforts have facilitated better understanding of and support for local educational needs by the community's inward power structure.

In communities where curriculum planning activities have proven effective, even the problems of the economic crunch have received careful study as to the level of financial support the schools can realistically expect. Also, where the curtailing of school offerings has proven necessary, decisions have been made after careful review, and the greatest possible agreement as to which cuts would be least harmful to the learning opportunities provided by the school.

No Sleight of Hand

It is recommended that ASCD undertake a major project to make available to its membership case studies of successful, well planned curriculum development programs. Likewise, we have the responsibility to study the literature of successful theory and practice of systematic curriculum planning.

It is critical that the means to curriculum development be undertaken with a commitment to the true representative interaction of professionals, students, and community citizens. The task will be time consuming and will require continuing effort by all involved. However, accomplishments of numerous plan-oriented districts should convince us that we have everything to gain. Unfortunately, in many situations, we do not have too much left to lose! [5]

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