



# School Boards and the Curriculum A Case of Accountability

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*The local school board has many legal and moral responsibilities for the manner in which its school district carries out daily educational functions. More precisely, the board is directly accountable to the state legislature and the local community for everything that happens within the schools. None of the board's responsibilities is more vital than is the quality of the curriculum and instructional program. The problem thus faced by the lay board is how to assume this responsibility with precision and thoroughness. Suggested here by the author is a model for the development of assessments and supervision—a model that is appropriate to the board's crucial role in shaping the success of the curriculum and instructional process.*

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Let's start with the obvious: The plenary power for education in the states resides with the state legislatures. The state legislatures, in turn, delegate their plenary power directly to local boards of education, bypassing the state departments of education altogether. Ergo, the school board's legal responsibility for the curriculum is well established in state statutes.

The local school board can take actions that are not excluded by specific law. The state department of education, on the other hand, can take only those actions that are specifically permitted by the legislature. Hence, given the fact that the state legislature has the ultimate power, the degree of delegation of this power to the local boards of education varies from state to state. Even so, it is a generally undisputed assumption that most school boards in most states are held directly accountable for the curriculums within their respective districts. As a result, the curriculum is viewed as a fundamental responsibility of the school board.

## Curriculum Accountability: Implications for the School Board

Since the local school board has ultimate accountability for the curriculum, the board must therefore have firsthand knowledge of and provide oversight to the total instructional program of its schools. Consequently, the school board's responsibilities within the curriculum framework narrow down to the following imperatives:

- To be informed of the scope and content of the curriculum
- To be informed of state guidelines and regulations in relation to curricular and instructional matters (such as state textbook adoption practices)
- To be aware of and sensitive to community values, attitudes, and curricular concerns
- To keep the community informed of the school's instructional program
- To be actively involved in the curriculum planning process, and to ensure that all groups with a vested interest in the local instructional program are represented in the planning process.

Because the school board's curriculum responsibility encompasses the "output" of local curriculum planning groups, it is vital that an ongoing, cooperative system for curriculum development be established. This system must be structured in such a way that all those who claim "ownership" of the local curriculum—whether they be administrators, teachers, parents, or citizen groups—are responsibly involved or represented in some way within the planning system. Hence, through the structure of a deliberate mechanism for cooperative curriculum development, it is rationally assumed that a local school board can forestall or prevent educational controversies from becoming crisis situations.

To support the foregoing rationale, one need only cite recent examples of controversies that are a direct result of a lack of "ownership" of the curriculum by local constituencies. In such controversies, the school board became the target of attack by pressure groups and, expectedly, the center of disproportionate crises.

The critics of sex education during the late 1960s, for example, used tactics such as threatening school boards with lawsuits, recall elec-

tions, defeat of bond issues, investigation by state boards of education, and other measures calculated to pressure boards into conforming to their views.<sup>1</sup> The selection and censorship of textbooks by local community pressure groups and by state legislatures are other illustrations of how the persistent efforts of small groups can result in curriculum and textbook changes that are not in accord with sound learning theory and teaching methods.<sup>2</sup> Reactionary changes such as these

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might have been avoided if the issues had been carefully studied by lay citizens and professional educators within the context of a curriculum planning system.

Similarly, a recent lawsuit—brought against the Leonia, New Jersey, school board by the Leonia Education Association and several private citizens—serves to dramatize further that when all interested parties are not involved in curriculum decisions, even the most seemingly sound and promising instructional programs may have disastrous results for the school board.<sup>3</sup> In this particular case, the Leonia Board of Education initiated an innovative program that utilized a wide variety of talented community resource people as elective course instructors; this was done without the support and planning input of the high school faculty and administration. While the state education commissioner initially ruled against the board, the American Civil Liberties Union later appealed the case on behalf of con-

<sup>1</sup> Joanne Zazzaro. "The War on Sex Education: An 11-Page Survival Kit for School Boards." *The American School Board Journal* 157(2):15; August 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford A. Hardy. "Censorship and the Curriculum." *Educational Leadership* 31(1):10-13; October 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Vicki I. Karant. "Socrates Denied: A Defeat for Community Resource People in the Public Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 58(8): 639-41; April 1977.

cerned parents and citizens in defense of the program. The decision by the state board of education on this controversy is still pending.

These examples point out the inherent problems that arise when changes in an instructional program are made on the basis of so-called "one-shot" curriculum studies, or are the result of reactionary pressure rather than of sound educational planning. An ongoing mechanism for cooperative curriculum development—to be outlined later in this article—can serve as the vehicle for preventing curriculum controversies from be-

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coming crisis issues for local school boards. Such a planning system—viewed as the technique for resolving controversies before they reach exigent proportions—is seen as the means for:

1. Preventing reactionary curricular changes and policies by school boards
2. Preventing forced board decisions, stemming from pressure by special community interest groups
3. Allowing the careful study of critical instructional issues before their implementation.

### A Cooperative Curriculum Development Model

A model for systematic curriculum planning that involves the cooperative efforts of professional educators and laymen is certainly not a new concept in the curriculum field. Models for such systems have been part of the history of curriculum study for the past 40 years, as reflected in the literature of the field. Familiarity with this literature is, of course, a necessity for professional curriculum planners.<sup>4</sup> The model proposed here represents a regeneration of efforts toward the careful study of the curriculum field, as well as toward establishment of comprehensive curricu-

lum development models. The impetus for such efforts should come from the local school board which, as noted earlier, is ultimately accountable for the outputs of such curriculum planning models.

Whatever curriculum planning system is selected or created—or when an instructional program is under review—it should be an open system. It should require the cooperative efforts of both professional educators and laymen from the community. Indeed, curriculum planning should be a deliberate process of constant study and revision, a procedure that will provide an ongoing educative experience for all its participants.

Before any model for curriculum development is created or implemented, it is essential that the decision makers for such planning clearly define their understanding of the terms "curriculum" and "curriculum development." Is "curriculum" to mean a written document, a list of instructional goals or objectives, a comprehensive curriculum guide that includes goals, activities, and recommended instructional materials? Or is it to constitute the selection of a textbook or a published instructional program? Similarly, is "curriculum development" meant to be a decision-making process? An advisory process? Who will be involved in this process? How will participants be involved? And so on. These questions must be clarified and understood by the participants before planning or program review occurs.

The components of a comprehensive curriculum development model—at very minimum—ought to include the following considerations:

1. Decisions concerning who should be involved in the process and at what level
2. Determination of topics for study and/or review
3. Acquisition of the data, skills, and resources necessary for curriculum study
4. Selection and identification of appropriate planning procedures and processes
5. Establishment of implementation procedures
6. Development of evaluation models for the

<sup>4</sup> Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr. "Will the Real Curriculum Player Step Forth?" *Educational Leadership* 34(1): 12-16; October 1976.

curriculum and for the curriculum planning process.

### Involvement

Selecting the persons to be involved in the curriculum development process, and at what level they will be involved, will depend upon school board policy and the local situation. In some school districts, for example, it may be preferable to form a standing curriculum committee composed of teachers, administrators, and community personnel; in others it may be more desirable to form a standing citizens' committee on curriculum that serves solely in an advisory capacity. Depending on the types of curricular issues prevalent in the community, it may be advantageous to form *ad hoc* special interest committees that can serve as advisory groups to the standing curriculum committee. (A textbook review committee would fall into this category.)

The decision to involve students in curriculum planning is generally advocated in the literature. However, I have yet to see a model that effectively incorporates student input into this process. It is difficult for students to know "what" should be taught; therefore, it seems to be more appropriate to involve students at the level of instructional planning with their teachers. To be sure, students may provide input to their instructors in the area of the selection of appropriate teaching techniques, materials, and activities.

### Study Topics

When determining which areas or topics of the curriculum to review and study, curriculum planners would be well advised to assess the needs and concerns of their publics—namely, students, community, and the educational community. Needs of the student population may be assessed by reviewing relevant data on student achievement, aptitude, attitude, and background. Likewise, the needs and concerns of the general community may be ascertained through community polls and surveys, or through interviews with members of special interest groups in the community. Curriculum planners also must be keenly aware of current trends in education, particularly research efforts in the field of curriculum; profes-

sional educators and curriculum workers can provide important support in this endeavor.

### Necessary Data and Skills

In studying the areas of importance within the curriculum under assessment, curriculum planners and those weighing the appropriateness and effectiveness of an ongoing program must determine what types of data, resources, and skills will be needed in order to undertake their review. Some examples: Will it be necessary to do

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in-depth studies of certain subject matter areas from the disciplines? Will the expertise of consultants or subject matter experts be needed to educate the committee to specific educational content? Should there be a systematic assessment and analysis of community assumptions and expectations? Will the committee need training in terms of group processes and group planning skills before it can effectively work together as a unit? Such skills and information are necessary before the group can assume the actual task of curriculum planning and writing or the evaluation of a current curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

### Planning Procedures and Processes

The heart of curriculum development consists of planning procedures and processes. It is at this point that curriculum planners—armed with previously acquired skills, knowledge, and information—attempt to organize their data into the framework of a curriculum design. This process involves curricular goals formulated on a coopera-

<sup>5</sup> Maud C. Hall. "An Evaluation of Curriculum Planning Processes and Products." Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University, 1976. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

tive basis, selection of the appropriate design or organizational framework for such goals, and the actual planning and writing of a curriculum document.<sup>6</sup> Appropriate instructional activities and materials for these goals also may be determined at this point. As well, the involvement of a carefully directed *ad hoc* study committee would be particularly desirable.

### Implementation and Evaluation

An essential part of the planning process centers around the curriculum planners' need to

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make recommendations concerning how the curriculum may be most successfully implemented in the instructional program of the school (the commitment and support of teachers and administrators clearly is essential for a successful implementation). Likewise, models that provide for the ongoing evaluation of the curriculum—as well as an evaluation of the curriculum planning process itself—must be woven into the final document.

Thus, if the curriculum planning process is to achieve optimal results, the school board and the school district's entire instructional team must accommodate instructional arrangements that will implement the plan effectively. Moreover, the board-instructor team has the responsibility to provide the means and resources necessary for follow-through of the curriculum in the classroom. Objective data measuring results of the instruction-learning process must be regularly and systematically gathered. An effective plan of supervisory instruction is required if the projected curricular objectives are to become an integral part of the planning-implementation-evaluation-assessment process.

The school board should require the school's

overall curriculum planning and implementation apparatus to ask these questions:

1. Is the curriculum sound?
2. Is the instructional staff implementing the plan?
3. Are students learning what was desired and planned for them to learn?

Vigilant attention to these questions will assure that evaluation and planning are continuous cycles that will constantly renew and regenerate each other.

### The Curriculum Development Model and School Board Accountability

In sum, the establishment of an ongoing, comprehensive curriculum development model emerges as a possible vehicle for ensuring that the school's curriculum meets the needs and interests of all the publics to which the school board is accountable. The comprehensive model is seen as such a mechanism because it incorporates the following tenets:

1. A provision for the input of all constituents at the appropriate level of participation
2. A means for constant study, review, and revision of the curriculum
3. Citizens who are well informed regarding the instructional program of the school and the rationale behind it
4. A well-informed and responsive school board
5. A sound curriculum that is based on traditional educational principles and foundations, as well as local values and needs. [F]

<sup>6</sup> George A. Beauchamp. *Curriculum Theory*. Third edition. Wilmette, Illinois: The Kagg Press, 1975. 216 pp.



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