

What About Curriculum Reform at the State Level?

Kenneth D. Hall and Virginia Brinson



Team planning at a multi-unit high school.

These authors plead for maintaining a balance among federal, state, and local forces affecting education. "Only so can education survive, retain the flexibility to adapt to local needs, seek new and innovative answers, revise and cull from the old."

Over the past five years, the curriculum reform movement in American education has been jolted by intense criticism of most public school programs. It has become increasingly fashionable to use a "shotgun" approach in attacking any program that is not devoted to the so-called "back to basics" movement. Critics of public education, such as Admiral Hyman Rickover and Frank E. Armbruster—both great hindsight prognosticators—seem resolved to undo the considerable progress that has been made to make quality schooling available to millions of children who were previously excluded from the mainstream of American education.

For example, Rickover, testifying at a recent congressional hearing on a bill to set national competency standards, blasted the "educational establishment" for what he sees as the dismal performance of public schools. He further called for abolishing the U.S. Office of Education or, minimally, cutting its appropriations in half. Armbruster, in his book *Our Children's Crippled Future: How American Education Has Failed*, placed most of the blame for pupils' declining test scores on school administrators and teachers. His remedy is a return to a system we had 20 years ago. His research is at best questionable, providing few sources and corroborative documentation.

Although the super and not so super elitist intellectuals are disconcerting, they are actors on the great stage of discontent, and they do perhaps signal a need for public school educators to renew their efforts in both the political and educational arenas. A failure to do so can and probably will result in ill-conceived legislation that could prove extremely harmful to public education; for, as we will discuss, legislation does impact curriculum reform at both the state and federal levels.

At the national level, the federal role in education continues to be largely one of doing or causing to be done what others should, but do not do. Education of the minorities remains a



Middlesex teachers prepare skill development games.

principal problem and desegregation remains one of the U.S. Office of Education's most sensitive program areas. Federal policy at present is disorganized and confusing and at best seems to be a continuation of the 1950-'60 agenda, thus providing little that is new or innovative but offering great opportunities for influence in shaping future policy as it may relate to curricular reform.

State Influence

The 1970s might appropriately be referred to as the decade in which the states began to take the lead in curricular reform. This trend has developed partly because local schooling is a state function, partly because the state is a convenient and more easily controlled administrative level, and partly because many of the states' activities have been funded by the federal government.

The "back-to-basics" movement and the concomitant criticism of public schools have given state departments of education impetus to increase regulatory control over localities and to direct, if not mandate, curriculum reform. "Quality" or "thorough and efficient" education is being defined in many states through specific requirements or minimum competencies at various stages in a child's school life and, more par-

ticularly, at high school graduation. Twenty-nine states are at some phase of investigation or implementation of minimum graduation proficiencies;¹ thus, close to 60 percent of the states have already established or are considering establishing new standards for a high school diploma, based on course requirements and/or minimum competencies. Either could dictate curriculum reform at the local level. A combination of the two seemingly leaves less room for innovative curriculum within any community.

For example, California has a State High School Proficiency Test in the areas of reading, computation skills, and consumer economics. By law, any 16- or 17-year-old student who passes this test may be awarded a proficiency certificate that is the legal equivalent of a diploma. Those who pass are allowed to leave school provided their parents have approved. There seems to be scant literature concerning the effect of this law on curriculum development. One could conjecture, however, that a high school might be inspired to become creative in developing a curriculum that will make students want to stay in schools. This law, coupled with declining enroll-

¹ National School Public Relations Association. *Education USA*. Washington, D.C., March 28, 1977. p. 225.

ments, could create a crisis for public schools in California.

Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Nebraska, Oregon, and Virginia have all passed legislation that would require local districts to develop competency tests commensurate with their local goals to demonstrate student proficiency in certain prescribed areas. Additionally, many more states already have implemented or are in the process of implementing statewide minimum basic skills tests to monitor progress of a student at specific levels throughout his/her school life. Whether these requirements have given impetus to more creative teaching approaches and course work is still surmise at this point. Again, the possibility is there.

The New Jersey Public School Act

A closer look at the educational history of a particular state gives a better base for examining state influence on curriculum reform. In 1875, an amendment to the New Jersey Constitution mandated the legislature to: "Provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools."

In 1903, the legislature charged the State Board of Education and the Commissioner with the responsibility to "ascertain the thoroughness and efficiency of operation of any of the schools of the public school system of the state."

No further legislation or educational definition was officially recorded until the *Robinson vs. Cahill* suit of 1972. The case was entered in behalf of student Robinson against Cahill, then the governor of the State of New Jersey. The suit charged that the plaintiff was not receiving an equal education—equal to that of other students in other communities. The suit further alleged that a school finance system that relied on property taxes for its main base furthered inequality of opportunity.

In 1973, the court found for the plaintiff. In rendering the decision, the court mandated the state legislature to enact a financial plan that would provide an equalized tax base from community to community. The court further mandated the State Board of Education to define operationally the terms "thorough and efficient."

The next few years were chaotic in both the

political and educational arenas. While the State Department of Education was struggling with the operational definition of "thorough and efficient," the legislature, in 1975, enacted into law the Public School Education Act (Chapter 212); they did not, however, pass financial legislation to support the law. Finally, in 1977, after two years of vacillating, after partially defaulting on state aid promised to districts, and after the actual closing of schools for two weeks in July of 1977, a state income tax was passed to give financial support for the already existing law.

The law is multifaceted. In attempting to define specific educational action, it mandates that communities shall:

1. *Develop Goals*—with "involvement of teachers, staff members, administrators, board members, pupils, parents, and other citizens"²
2. *Establish Assessment Objectives*—goal indicators and specific levels of achievement or standards
3. *Identify Needs*—difference between what is and what is desired (objectives)
4. *Develop and Install Educational Programs*—to provide translation from goals to reality
5. *Evaluate Program Effectiveness*—to determine whether goals and objectives have been met and to recycle adaptive goals.

The law specifies what is to be achieved at a district level; the how is left to the locality. Both legislators and state department educators proclaim loudly that the T & E law protects not diminishes local autonomy. In fact, the State Department says:

Autonomy in the running of local schools is enhanced by the Act and by the plan for implementing it. The local district sets its own goals, objectives, and standards for improvement. Nothing in T & E demands any particular curriculum, mode of teacher training or system of evaluation.³

True to a limited extent. But, three major factors that significantly affect local curriculum are somewhat overlooked in the above statement.

² Department of Education, State of New Jersey. *T&E A Primer for School Improvement in New Jersey*. Trenton, New Jersey, 1976. p. 8-11.

³ *Ibid.*

The state gives an assessment test to determine proficiencies of pupils throughout the state in the areas of reading and math at various grade levels. Previously, the test had been an assessment at grades four, seven, and ten. Students who scored right answers on sixty-five percent (65%) of the states' items had to be identified and provided special programs or remedial help if a district were to receive compensatory education funds, provided by the Act. In the summer of 1978, a further impetus to curriculum reform will become operable. Schools will be classified as: "approved," "conditionally approved," or "unapproved."

The district will be given the classification of the poorest performance of its schools. Classification will be based on two major factors:

1. The performance of its students on a new minimum Basics Skills test to be administered to students in grades three, six, nine, and eleven in April 1977. One absolute for the "approved" classification is having a given percentage (75 percent at the time of writing of this article) of the students score above a given cut-off (not determined at the time of writing).

2. The district's progress toward meeting its self-determined educational plan coupled with successful implementation of federal and state mandated programs, for example, Affirmative Action, Handicapped Law, and so on. Despite any rate of progress on the second aspect, scores must be achieved for a district to be classified "approved." Again, the state is determining the area of concentration for curriculum reform and punishing (by labeling) districts that do not achieve in these specified areas.

Another segment of Chapter 212 places a limit on the amount of money each district can spend. The New Jersey State Legislature, in its enthusiasm to hold down property taxes, applied a Budget Cap formula to all districts based on a single state average net current expense average (NCEA). This part of Chapter 212 has created an extremely paradoxical situation. On one hand, the state is calling, through Chapter 212, for a thorough and efficient system of education in each school system; and on the other hand, it is legislating mandatory cuts that make it virtually impossible to comply with the law. The net im-

pact of budget cap legislation has been, therefore, a penalizing of those school districts throughout the state of New Jersey that have, over the years, maintained excellent educational programs. The budget cap formula fails to take into account the following: (a) fixed costs (utilities, insurance, and so on) over which a board has no controls; (b) new state mandated programs; (c) different types of school districts (regional high school districts, county vocational districts, and so on) that require a greater per pupil expenditure of funds; (d) however, the fact that if a district appropriates free balance in one year the district is penalized the next year doubly if it cannot appropriate an equal amount of free balance.

The most serious of all problems emanating from the budget cap legislation is the danger of almost total control of educational programs and curriculum at the state level. In 1977, the Commissioner of Education reviewed approximately 100 local school budgets and, in a substantial number of cases, actually caused, both directly and indirectly, modification in priorities that were initially determined at the local district level.

A third aspect of Chapter 212 that gives evidence to state influence over curriculum reform is the provision of \$1,700,000 for Research and Development funds to support new compensatory education programs. These state incentive funds are handled much like Federal Title IV-C funds (old Title III) in that proposals must detail a unique approach to solving an education problem. These specific state funds are directed only to problems in reading and computation for low achievers, thus the state is controlling incentive curriculum reform. Additionally, as was stated earlier in this article, most federal educational funds are distributed through the state. Not only does the state determine who gets the money, it establishes focus areas for federal programs as well. Although state and federal seed money does provide for local initiative in curriculum, that initiative is molded at the state level.

The Middlesex Program—State Incentive

Compensatory Education programs funded under Chapter 212 are selected because of their uniqueness in approaching an educational problem and the replicability of the ideas to be piloted.



Olga Kupczak disseminates a nationally validated, multi-unit high school project.

One such program, funded in July of 1977 after a three-month planning grant, is Project Climb—Coordinated Learning Integration, Middlesex Basics. This three-year project enables a small, middle-class borough in Central Jersey to explore methods for improving proficiency in the basic skills. A K-12, twenty-eight hundred (2,800) pupil district with four elementary, a middle, and a high school, Middlesex is the one hundred and fortieth (140) largest district of the 603 in the state. As with most school districts in the state and nation, Middlesex has varied sources of aid for students who are not performing at the expected level. Help might come from Title I, district remedial programs, volunteer services, special education programs, and child study team aid. The numerous sources of aid become a puzzle: What help should we give to which pupils and when? Lack of coordination between and among the extra help and the classroom programs or the "overkill" of extra help often has a regressive effect on a student, fragmenting him/her and making him/her feel so inadequate that he/she tunes out all help and sometimes even school itself.

Project Climb has four major goals directed toward alleviating the condition discussed in the preceding paragraph. The "core" goal is to develop a management model that assures: identification of all students in need of help; coordination of personnel, materials, and services in a unified attack upon a student's deficiencies without "overkill"; and the monitoring of progress with specific mandated checkpoints. Two goals

deal with the curriculum in reading and math that provide a base upon which the model is built. The curriculum goals are:

1. The generation of K-12 skills array or taxonomy for both reading and mathematics.
2. The operationalization of strategies whereby students receive efficient and effective diagnosis, prescription, and instruction relative to the elements of each of the arrays.

The successful implementation of any new program is dependent upon the expertise and enthusiasm of the teachers who work with it. To this end, the in-service component of the project is generated from one of its most crucial goals: the involvement and training of teachers in the methodology needed to implement the two curriculum goals. The in-service component began big in July 1977 with 79 of the district's 197 teachers participating in one of four 17-day workshops: K-5 math, K-5 reading, 6-12 math, 6-12 reading in the content area. All worked on the further refinement of the teacher-developed skills arrays and materials as well as in some phase of diagnostic and prescriptive techniques. In-service will continue for these 79 teachers throughout the '77-'78 school year and another four-phase workshop will be conducted for a new group during the summers of 1978 and 1979. The goal for the in-service facet is to have a majority of all teaching staff in the district trained in a minimum of two of the four phases and all of the staff trained in at least one phase. The enthusiastic attitude of the original 79 teachers makes this goal seem realistic at this point.

The districtwide implementation of skills arrays, instructional delivery systems, in-service, and a management model seems ambitious for a three-year project. However, Middlesex educators felt the necessity for a far-reaching, concerted effort to assure coordination and continuity of instruction for all students. It is through this concerted effort that the system expects to realize the most important of all its goals—improved student performance.

North Hunterdon—Federal and State Incentive

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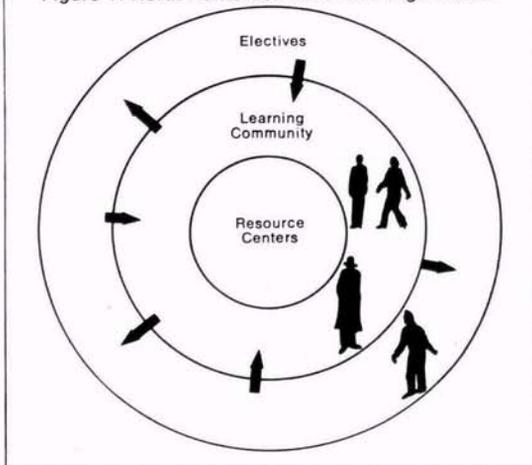
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Figure 1: North Hunterdon Multi-Unit High School



working together and complementing each other in funding programs that make schools responsive to the needs of the students, community, and teachers.

North Hunterdon High School, one of two high schools that presently comprise the 17-square mile North Hunterdon Regional District in Hunterdon County, New Jersey, is a school that was built for 1,800 students, but had a population of 2,400 in 1975. The academic program was based on 300 multi-elective courses that initially satisfied the needs of students. However, parents and students began to feel that the students lacked the personal attention that was necessary to motivate the students. This feeling was evidenced in an increase of low passing grades, failures, truancies, and vandalism. Each semester, the large turnover of students in every class was limiting the individual pupil-teacher contact causing the students and teachers to drift further apart.

In response to these problems, the staff and administration researched, studied, and visited schools. A basic concept (see fig. 1), interdisciplinary teams, or mini-schools, or learning communities (L.C.) consisting of four teachers in the basic subject areas, plus a guidance counselor, emerged that allows teachers to spend greater amounts of time with students.

Students receive the personal attention via a three-phase program: advisor-advisee, instruction, and self-governance.

The advisor-advisee component on the L.C. ensures that those elements of human development are carried out by all Learning Community staff members, that proper comprehensive assessment instruments are given to all students, and that appropriate curriculum is developed to meet student needs. The instructional phase matches learning styles with teaching styles. The self-governance component allows teachers to make immediate decisions that affect students as long as they are congruent with district/school goals and objectives.

In addition, students are encouraged to participate in a broad range of enrichment activities during school, such as the elective program, the resource centers, and other after-school activities. These programs are held in equilibrium by a modular/block schedule.

As expected with the implementation of the program, failures, class cutting, vandalism, and truancies have been reduced from 23% to 3%, and the SAT and IOWA test scores have demonstrated that academic achievements have also increased.

A Careful Future

Proficiencies! Graduation Requirements! Minimum Standards! Control! Incentives! Classification of Schools!

All of these concepts connote a big *state*. There is no doubt that the state plays a very important role in curriculum reform, a role that is not all bad, but not all good either. As was discussed earlier, the state has a function to stimulate school systems that are not serving the needs of all of the students, for it has a legal responsibility for overseeing the educational output of the state. Historically, however, states have delegated that responsibility to local communities. Minimum standards and graduation requirements currently being determined at the state level with demonstrated proficiency delegated to the local level is an example of this continuing trend. Local autonomy cannot be lost. As educators we stress the need for individualized educational programs for students. Increased state control and individualized education are dichotomous, for each district has a unique personality and specific needs.

If education is to survive and to retain the

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flexibility to adapt to local needs, seek new and innovative answers, and revise and cull from the old, a balance must be maintained among the federal, state, and local educational forces.

Together we must be watchful to keep the state influence in balance. A careful future is a necessity. [FL]



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