"Curriculum design, development, and evaluation are, always have been, and always will be special cases of political behavior." These authors examine the implications of political realities as these affect curriculum decision making.

Curriculum decision making finds itself in transition between theories of well-controlled models of decision making and political realities imbedded in forces at national, state, and local levels. Curriculum design, development, and evaluation are, always have been, and always will be special cases of political behavior. By political behavior we mean activity directed toward influencing or controlling decisions about the allocation of values.¹

Deciding who should have access to what knowledge; how that knowledge is to be selected, organized, and presented; who should be evaluated about what and how, . . . is clearly a process of allocating values. It is a political reality that some people have greater power than others in making curriculum decisions. It is also a political reality that more and more people are seeking greater involvement in curriculum matters. The importance of who is involved in shaping the curriculum is underscored by Schaffarzick et al. when they state, "... concern for who should make

curriculum decisions appears to take priority over
the question 'what shall be taught?'"^{2}

- Who does influence the allocation of values
  that result in curricula?
- To what extent do local, state, and national
  sources influence or have control over curriculum
  matters?
- What characterizes the political activities
  of curriculum development at the local, state, and
  national levels?
- What are the points of demand and conflict
  in contemporary curriculum decision making?

These questions guide our examination of the
locus of curriculum influence and control, the
forms of political behavior engaged, and the
points of conflict focused upon in curriculum
decision making.

The Locus of Curriculum Control

Sorting out the quandary of federal vs. state
vs. local influence is difficult at best. The inter-
locking relations are complex and frequently un-
clear. With respect to federal control, the issue is
how much really exists, and just what is the nature
of federal curriculum influence? Responses to this
question are highly dependent on whom you ask
about which programs or situations. Some observ-
ers have suggested that federal influence pervades
virtually all facets and levels of the educational
enterprise, creating de facto control of education
at the state and local levels through the myriad of
compliance regulations and conditions for receipt
of aid.\(^3\)

While on the one hand, strong federal legis-
lation continues to encourage corrective and/or
preventive programs that emerge in response to
a need left unattended (purposely or unpurposely)
by state/local decision makers and that are in the
national interest (for example, N.S.F., N.D.E.A.,
Vocational Education, Mainstreaming, and so on),
communities frequently perceive these actions as
deliberate attempts to usurp the "grassroots" re-
sponsibility for educational decision making. Dis-
tinctions between federally funded program
development and priority recommendations con-
tinue to be confused with state and local commu-
nity rights and responsibilities for making rational
choices among alternatives. For another perspec-
tive on the curriculum priorities of a key federal
educational agency, it is instructive to review the
products of the NIE Curriculum Task Force.\(^4\)

Clearly the federal government influences
curriculum decision making, particularly in sup-
port of selected curriculum research and develop-
ment efforts. To suggest that "they" control
curriculum decision making at the state or local
level is naive and ill-founded. Of perhaps greater
power than the substantive focus of federal aid
to curriculum decision making is the imposition of
a way of thinking and talking about curriculum

"Who influences curriculum decision mak-
ing? Nearly any organization, at any level,
that has a concern. Who controls curricu-
lum decision making? No one."

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\(^{2}\)National Institute of Education Curriculum Task
Force. Current Issues, Problems and Concerns in Curric-

\(^{3}\)Joel Spring. The Sorting Machine. New York: David

\(^{4}\)Harold L. Hodgkinson. NIE's Role in Curriculum
Development: Findings, Policy Options, and Recommenda-
tions. National Council on Educational Research, Feb-
ruary 1977.

\(^{5}\)James B. Macdonald. "A Curriculum Rationale." See:
Edmund C. Short and George D. Marconnet, editors.
Contemporary Thought on Public School Curriculum.
1. Legislative mandates that define certain areas to be included in the curriculum for a specified amount of time each day for 180+ days.

2. Statewide textbook adoption policies in several states.

3. State approval of school charters and inspection rights over the curriculum are a particularly powerful control as many alternative schools have discovered.

4. State certification of teachers, administrators, and supervisors by approval of college and university programs. (For example, the Ohio plan for the redesign of teacher certification programs requires that the curriculum of all state accredited programs include preparing all teachers to teach reading as it relates to their specialty.)

Where they exist, state textbook adoptions are without a doubt a most pervasive force. All are not equally rigorous or controlling, however. In a recent action in Texas, an example of strong state adoption practices, the Dallas school board by a vote of six to three overrode the state adoption list in favor of a “creationist” series of biology texts, workbooks, and instructional manuals. This is one example of successful efforts on the part of local community pressures in opposition to state mandates.

In another state, a citizen’s instructional materials review committee was formed at the behest of and including a “contemporary critic” of the schools through the president of the State Board of Education. Ground rules for the committee established at the request of the “critic” assured that only unanimously agreed on positions would be reported from the committee. No reports have been forthcoming. This is democracy and rational dialogue?

Not to be overlooked or underestimated as a force on curricular decision making is accountability legislation ranging from mandated reporting to citizens by each and every school district to a statewide standard high school exit examination as in Florida. Accountability legislation now exists in no fewer than 22 states. One characteristic of all these legislative actions is demand for improved performance in the so-called basic skills. The reality and threat of comparison of student performance data from class to class and school to school have created an atmosphere of unrest and mistrust among community, professional educators, and state legislatures. Some curriculum leaders in Michigan, an early entrant into the movement, feel that the assessment program has caused inordinate attention to be directed toward reading and mathematics instruction, with a consequent neglect of other important areas of student learning.

Another form of accountability legislation has been proposed for Ohio to be administered to all pupils in grades three, six, nine, and eleven as prerequisites to promotion to the next grade level. Simultaneously, forces continue to press for adequate programs to meet individual differences and broad-ranging social/emotional development. The proposed Ohio legislation does not limit to, but explicitly requires, examinations in reading and computation.

At the local level, citizens continue to hold the belief that ultimate control over educational decision making rests with the community. Given this point of view, one would assume the appropriateness of direct community involvement in policy formulation and decision making. The fundamental question remains—whose values are to be incorporated into the scenarios of schooling for youth in a given community? Clearly, among the most difficult concepts to incorporate into the mentality of any community and specific interest groups therein, is that a monolithic curriculum cannot serve the needs of a pluralistic society. The challenge is to orchestrate divergent value positions into a functional paradigm for schooling incorporating alternative modes and programs.

All the while that local curriculum leaders, teachers, citizens, and lay leaders believe they are making the critical program decisions, they may well be living a myth. The recent NIE Report notes that “publishers supply the great bulk of materials used in schools, and instructional materials, especially textbooks, structure most classroom activity.” Further, it is estimated that “95 percent of all classroom time involves use of textbooks.”

8 State Board of Education. Standards for Colleges or Universities Preparing Teachers. Columbus, Ohio: Department of Education, 1975.


they perceived as being involved and to what extent in selecting and organizing objectives, selecting textbooks, selecting and organizing content, and similar curriculum decisions. The findings so far show that:

1. Students are not involved at all.
2. Parents, individually or collectively, are rarely involved and when involved serve in an advisory capacity only.
3. Teachers, individually or collectively, tend to be involved in advising and deliberating, but rarely in making the decisions.
4. Principals and central office personnel are reported to be most active as deliberators and decision makers.
5. The superintendent and board of education are rarely sources of advice, seldom become apparent in the deliberations, but do decide and/or approve curriculum decisions.

Who influences curriculum decision making? Nearly any organization, at any level, that has a concern. Who controls curriculum decision making? No one.

Tactics and Techniques of Curriculum Control (The Contemporary Ax-Grinders)

The forces opposing contemporary curriculum practices are, for the most part, “externals” who are extraordinarily well organized. These pressure groups are, in most cases, small. They articulate in a straightforward manner their stated beliefs, give the appearance of having a well-ordered rationale, are willing to take risks, and have economic resources. In fact, tracing the patterns of networks of organized resistance is revealing and enlightening. Not infrequently, patterns of generating activity and controversy follow the classic lines reported by Mary Anne Raywid in the Ax-Grinders.10


mounted against isolated specific textbooks, films, or programs, for example, as a way ultimately to meet a different agenda.

Current critics of curriculum are quite adept at hitting at value positions held by the majority (both lay and professional) and demonstrating adverse relationships between programs and those values. Why cannot schools successfully countervail the arguments? How does a vocal minority overwhelm a silent majority?

For reasons not readily verifiable, it appears that constituents of organized opposition groups wishing to specifically prod schools and press for a conservative viewpoint will decline opportunities to officially participate as lay members of textbook review and curriculum committees. The litany of curricular issues that tend to attract demands and foster conflict from external sources are well known: sex education, values clarification, evolution, the basics, accountability, racism, sexism, grading, and patriotism.

Some Final Observations

We have touched on several aspects of political behavior and curriculum decision making that appear to exist in contemporary America.

1. We know far too little about the politics of curriculum. Political behavior is a necessary part of curriculum decision making. Attitudes of smugness or disdain toward the political is not only naive, it is foolhardy.

2. Federal interventions in curriculum stem from concerns for the national interest and tend to focus on those problems not adequately addressed by state or local curriculum decision makers.

3. Textbook publishers will respond to their clients—their power and economic survival rests with their ability to read the market.

4. External forces of greatest impact have targeted on basic cultural values in a highly organized manner. Internal decision makers seem to be ill-prepared to either anticipate reactions or posit new directions.

5. Policy formulation, function, and utilization are not well understood by school boards, central offices, or school district constituencies.

6. Distinctions between deliberating, deciding, and approving in relation to roles and responsibilities need to be better understood.

7. Reality is that locally held values will and must prevail.

8. Needs of varying groups and individuals to be heard and to participate in curriculum decisions tend to bring together unpredictable and unintended alliances.

9. External pressure groups are skillful at analyzing internal "soft spots" and will gain inroads through successful power plays, particularly when decision makers do not have conceptual control of their own curriculum affairs.

10. While the current scene suggests ambivalence and broad-ranging differences across the states, response to diverse pressures and forces will undoubtedly produce more sterile and stereotypic curricula unless all facets of the community (local through national levels) can be brought together to shape creative alternatives. Curriculum cannot tolerate "us-them" dichotomies.

It will no longer do for "...the educational system to function as a closed one in which the professional bureaucracy optimizes its power and consequently minimizes citizens' action."11


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