

EDITORIAL

Realities of Curriculum Change

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The fall of 1929 witnessed the disastrous stock market crash that ushered in the great depression. That was the year I joined the faculty of George Peabody College and became general consultant to the first of a number of major curriculum programs with which I was involved throughout the depression years.

We thought those years were hard, and indeed they did present many difficulties. Those who did not live through them cannot appreciate the pervasive influence of the depression on all aspects of American life. Disillusionment, fear, and even hunger were all too common. Without doubt it was one of the most trying periods in our nation's history. It seemed a poor time to undertake major curriculum change.

Yet when I compare the situation then with the situation now—contrasting the realities that confronted us with those that you face—the present situation seems more difficult. Constructive and needed curriculum change today will require all the vision, knowledge, competence, and persistence that curriculum leaders can muster.

This issue of *Educational Leadership* presents significant analyses of many of the current problems of curriculum change. There are three features of the present situation that seem to me to pose special difficulties. I shall consider them briefly. Fortunately, there are also some offsetting assets that I shall mention as well.

Faith in Education Eroded

As we all know, the founding fathers explicitly recognized the necessity of having an educated citizenry to assure that our government would be and remain both democratic and effective. Succeeding generations of public leaders re-emphasized the importance of education as an essential means of achieving not only our political goals, but also our economic and social aspi-

rations. The value of education has been one of the articles of faith of the American people.

Looking at the present situation, I have reluctantly concluded that this faith in education has dangerously eroded: The public schools of our nation simply no longer enjoy the depth and consistency of commitment from the public that once existed. There are several things that lead me to this conclusion.

Perhaps most important is the widespread acceptance of the idea that many people are over-educated. Although this is understandable at a time when many college graduates are unable to find employment in their chosen fields, it nevertheless reflects a gravely deficient conception of the role of education in our society. Educators are in part responsible for this misconception, for we have too often justified educational costs by the higher earning power of the better educated. It is difficult now to get the public to see the wider role education should play in helping people live enriched and satisfying lives.

Consequently, there is a tendency for the public to question the wisdom of compulsory attendance laws, liberal college admission policies, and a curriculum that offers a wide range of opportunities. There is an inclination to feel that apart from assuring a minimum level of literacy, our society has no further essential interest in the level of educational achievement of the great majority of its members. Even a cursory review of the knowledge and skills needed for constructive living in today's highly complex world reveals how superficial this view is. Nevertheless, it is widely held and accepted.

Today it is necessary for curriculum leaders to rewin the public commitment first won by Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and other leaders in their battle for free public education for all the children of all the people. This is a great added burden to assume. During the worst of the de-

pression years, public confidence in the fundamental importance of the schools was never undermined.

The Influence of Centralization

Over the years, support of the public schools has been built at the grassroots. I recall how in western Kansas during my boyhood people worked to establish a local high school—the pride they took in it, and the sacrifices they readily made to operate it. This occurred in community after community throughout America. Our schools have been overwhelmingly schools of the people—established by them, controlled by them, and supported by them. So much so that people at the local level have often resented and sometimes ignored regulations by state departments of education.

In 1961 in my annual report as President of Teachers College, Columbia University, I warned of the dangers of centralized control of the schools, pointing out that proposals then receiving favorable consideration would lead in that direction. Despite our long tradition of local control, significant centralization has in fact developed. Increased federal funding has brought with it federal regulations and guidelines. As a consequence, less and less attention is paid in local school systems to what the people of the community want, and more and more to meeting federal requirements in order to secure federal funds.

As a result, it is now far more difficult to develop strong community interest and support for public education. This reflects directly on the curriculum, for experience has shown that significant curriculum change depends substantially on the understanding and support of parents and other local citizens. Their support can be achieved meaningfully only by having them participate actively in changing the curriculum. Centralized

control greatly diminishes the opportunity to do this.

Centralized control of the curriculum can only work well in a selective educational system. So long as American schools remain dedicated to providing the best possible education for each child, whatever the child's capacities and needs may be, a considerable amount of unfettered local control is essential. Thus, the recent trend toward centralization offers a major challenge to curriculum workers today, for it poses a substantial threat to public education as we have known it.

Ways must be found to focus efforts for curriculum change more exclusively on individual schools. The systemwide approaches of the past may indeed no longer be effective. In recent years, new approaches such as alternative and magnet schools seem to have provided increased opportunities for participation by parents and pupils. Such new approaches must be developed in order to restore local participation to a level that will generate the public support essential for a continuously improving curriculum. Specialists in comparative education could render a major service in this regard by forcefully bringing to the attention of educators and the public the way England provides funding from the central government while maintaining local control of the curriculum and instruction.

Competency Examinations

The enactment of many state laws requiring competency examinations has greatly complicated the present situation. The legal imposition of minimum standards of achievement at certain grade levels forces schools to try to do something that long experience has demonstrated is impossible in an educational system that serves all the children of all the people well.

It is not as though professional educators had not previously faced the problem of estab-

lishing sound achievement goals and tried various solutions. The resort by the public to a legal solution grows out of people's frustration, misunderstanding, and ignorance: frustration over low achievement by some pupils (primarily the disadvantaged), misunderstanding of the complex problem of developing a desirable level of literacy in a TV-oriented society, and ignorance of the inevitable range of individual differences among students in any unselected group.

Legally imposed requirements will tend to limit the scope of opportunities made available to disadvantaged students and will encourage memorization of materials that help students pass tests. The long history of curriculum requirements imposed by law suggests that these laws do not lead to better education.

Yet such laws represent a reality that curriculum workers today cannot ignore. Ways must be found to implement the laws while at the same time minimizing their deleterious effect on the broader curriculum. The solution should include an immediate program to meet legal requirements and a long range program to achieve better public understanding of the educational implications of individual differences. The public must again come to appreciate the need of all pupils for an education closely related to their individual abilities and life activities.

Major Assets

As I talk with teachers, curriculum workers, and administrators today, I am impressed by the insight and competence they display. Desirable change may be harder to achieve, but professional educators are now much better informed than their predecessors about the process of change. This issue of *Educational Leadership* is an adequate illustration of that. Hopefully, it will serve to stimulate new insights by bringing together current professional leaders' interpreta-

tions of the nature of needed curriculum change and how best to realize it.

I am also impressed by the greatly increased body of research available now. During the years when I worked in the curriculum field, we depended largely on reasoned analysis to select alternatives and initiate change. Today analysis of a half century of experience and the specific findings of many research studies offer important guidance. As in the past, a gap exists between research and practice; and one of the major challenges is to narrow it.

Perhaps the single most important asset I note is the attitude of many curriculum workers toward change. Whereas before there was frequently a tendency to equate change with progress, greater professional competence today means less willingness to accept proposals without rigorous examination, and more insistence that proposals demonstrate their value on a pilot basis before being applied widely. This is all to the good, and promises more desirable and consistent curriculum change in the future.

Therefore, I find reason to hope that present educational personnel will face and constructively solve current curriculum problems, difficult as they are. While change does not assure progress, progress can come when educators respond creatively to a challenge such as this. [E]



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