

Power and Influence in the Change Process

Wendell M. Hough



Photo: Joe Di Dio, NEA.

According to this author, "There is a need for more people to recognize the significance of the power and the influence of those who are external to the school, and who are able to direct decisions in a way that is supportive and not counterproductive to the teaching-learning process."

Political, judicial, and collective bargaining decisions that affect the school curriculum are impinging more and more upon the professional lives of teachers and administrators and, in turn, upon youth. Sources of power and influence that are substantially external to the traditional professional environment of the curriculum worker have changed school organization, mandated testing programs, and prescribed processes for changing textbooks.

These sources of influence and power and the changes they bring about should be acknowledged, challenged, or supported as necessary.

They should also be viewed in the context of what really makes a difference in improving schools for youth. Many years ago we heard the statement that schools are too important to leave to the educators. Certainly the fact that schools are not left just to the educators is truer today than at any time in recent history.

Teachers' unions, primarily concerned with contractual provisions for wages and working conditions, are increasingly bringing the curriculum to the bargaining table. In Michigan, for example, there has been a significant increase in the number of provisions impacting upon the cur-



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riculum in teacher contracts with local boards of education. In spite of the fact that many curriculum workers urged contract provisions for in-service education and curriculum development, but not a negotiated curriculum,¹ the unions have continued to press for language that speaks directly to the curriculum.² The process by which curriculum decisions are made is a common provision of teacher contracts.

State departments of education through their advocacy of statewide testing, categorical financial aid, and professional development strategies may be viewed by curriculum workers as either facilitating or inhibiting. Their influence on local curriculum decision making, though varying from state to state, is clearly present. The same can be said of the Federal government, impacting primarily through state departments of education.

Stimulated by decentralization and regional plans of various kinds in the larger cities, and by categorically funded projects such as Teacher Corps with a strong community component, local citizens have become an

integral part of the decision-making process. Local school advisory committees, regional advisory committees, and citywide advisory committees on school matters in general and additional committees on specific components of the curriculum—for example, the advisory committee on vocational education, the advisory committee on sex education, the advisory committee on the gifted—are with us and frequently exert more influence than the term “advisory” would connote. Citizen committees whose mission is to influence educational decision making as well as quickly formed ad hoc community groups must be consulted and involved. Curriculum workers do

¹ Wendell M. Hough. “A Better Curriculum Through Negotiation?” *Educational Leadership* 26(6):531-34; March 1969.

² Arthur C. Frock. “The Hidden Determiners: A Trend Study Descriptive of the Extent to Which Language Directly Affecting Curriculum Exists in Teacher Collective Bargaining Agreements in Selected School Districts in Southeastern Michigan.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Detroit: College of Education, Wayne State University, 1977.

indeed receive a great deal of advice. A large city school superintendent once said that no matter what substantive decision he made, a half million people would be dissatisfied. Such is the kind of conflicting advice frequently heard by the curriculum worker.

Local boards of education find their work can be facilitated by having subcommittees of the board. It is not uncommon for a school district to have a board chairperson of the personnel committee, a chairperson of the budget committee, and a chairperson of the curriculum committee. This structure can be very helpful; it can also be very frustrating. As boards of education feel more and more pressure from the community on such issues as higher costs for education, declining enrollments and school closings, and conflicting directions for education, there is a tendency to centralize decision making at the board level. Well-developed curriculum decision-making strategies, with emphasis upon grass roots participation and widespread involvement, are sometimes destroyed because of local political confusion and upheaval.

The Detroit court-ordered desegregation plan issued in the summer of 1975 included more curriculum provisions than any other desegregation order before or since.³ The curriculum components included reading and communication skills, vocational education, testing, students' rights and responsibilities, school-community relations, counseling and career guidance, cocurricular activities, bilingual/multiethnic studies, and faculty assignments.

³ Ronald Bradley, *et al.* vs. William G. Milliken, *et al.* Civil No. 35257. Memorandum opinion and remedial decree, United States District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Southern Division, 1975. p. 124.

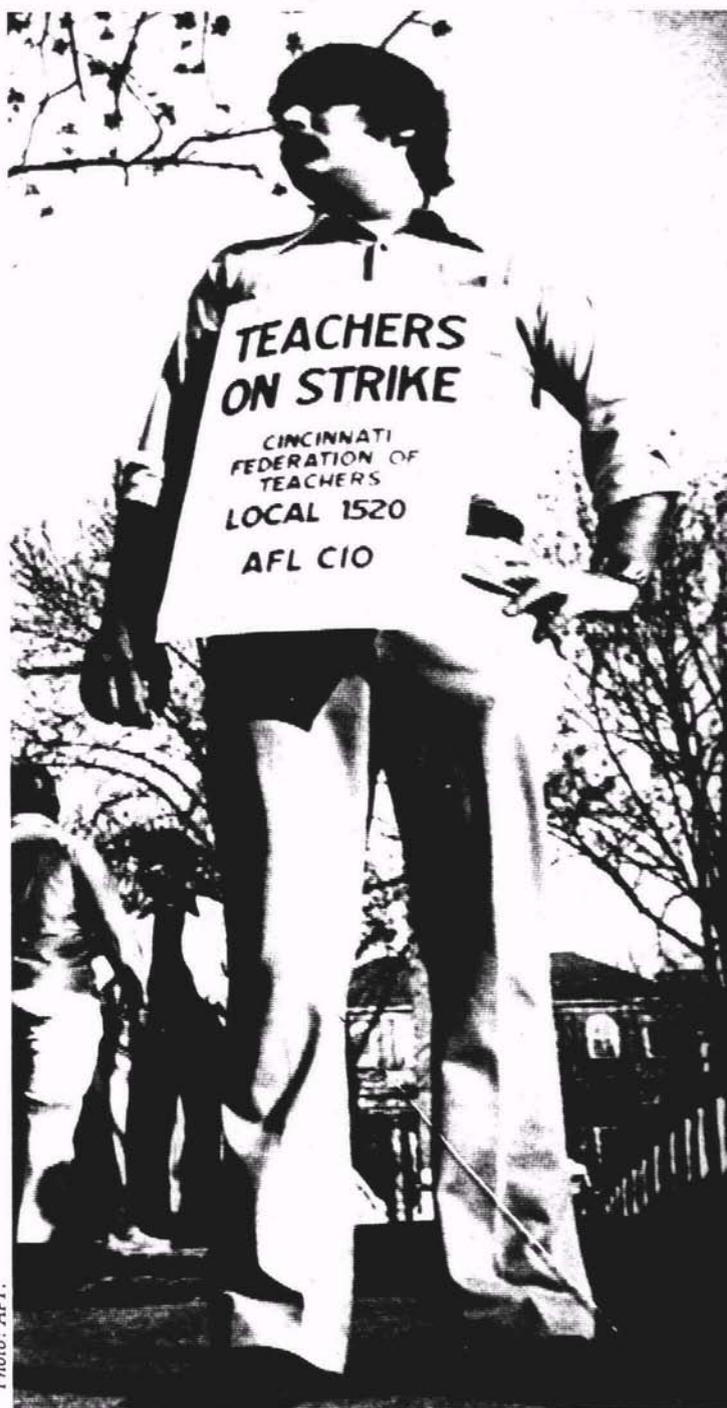


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These provisions were specific and directive. Middle schools, grades six through eight, were created instantly, and five area vocational schools were mandated. In-service education, as determined by the court, was ordered.

State legislatures control the allocation of public dollars. With these dollars can come specific professional development programs and, indeed, curricular mandates. The state of the schools is an important political issue, and state senators and representatives are taking and will continue to take positions and make decisions on curricular matters.

The politics of education has become an important part of our profession. There was a time not too long ago when such an assertion was regarded by many as unprofessional. This is no longer the case. The need for curriculum workers to be politically astute has been dramat-

ically demonstrated by a strong interest in a rather unique graduate course sponsored by the College of Education at Wayne State University for the past seven years. With several pre- and post-sessions, the central part of the course is a week-long stay in the nation's capital with a highly-structured agenda that includes presentations by bureau chiefs, agency personnel, program officers, and Congressmen and Senators, all directing their lectures and discussions to educational concerns and matters that are affecting and will affect the curriculum. In the spring of 1978, 40 graduate students, most of whom consider themselves curriculum workers, paid their tuition, their plane fares from Detroit, and the week's cost in Washington to learn more about the politics of education. The curriculum worker who does not acknowledge the reality and

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importance of politics of and in education is like the ostrich with its head in the sand.

Curriculum changes are being made by political, judicial, and collective bargaining decisions and agreements. These changes will continue and will probably increase. The curriculum worker should function with an understanding of these realities. Furthermore, he/she should help shape the direction that these forces would take. But the bottom line for improving teaching and learning is not to be found in changes induced from the forces as described earlier. Materials and equipment, school organization, technology, and school facilities can and do facilitate or inhibit the delivery of an effective curriculum, but more fundamental are the human interactions within a classroom and within the school building.

Teachers, administrators, students, and parents are affected by those who have political and economic power and influence. But, since the individual school building is the largest unit in which significant and successful curriculum change can occur, those who can make the real difference are the people in the school. In this sense, the school family is the principal source of power and influence rather than forces external to the school.

Implications from this discussion for the curriculum worker are enormous, frequently leading to considerable frustration. A Federal judge orders that a junior high school become a middle school. A union contract specifies who is to serve on a curriculum committee. Federal legislation requires that the governance for Teacher Centers consist of 51 percent teachers. A local board of education requires all elementary schools to have "the same curricu-

lum," even though such a requirement is impossible. A state legislature seeks to require that reading be taught the same number of minutes in each first-grade classroom. These examples are not meant to convey that all decisions made that are external to the school are negative or untimely. Many are, to be sure. The greatest danger from these external forces, however, is the tendency for the public to believe that schools will be improved subsequent to an im-



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posed school organization, a textbook, curriculum revision procedure, or whatever. And, always, there is the risk of teachers and administrators becoming complacent and possibly unwilling to be involved in program development.

There are effective curriculum workers, and there are good schools systematically trying to be even better in every state. Working in these schools are persons helping others become more aware, more ready, and more committed to the improvement of curriculum and instruction. They are persons who view the change process as a human process, strengthening the quality of human interaction. There is a need, however, for more people to recognize the significance of the power and the influence of those who are external to the school, and who are able to direct decisions in a way that is supportive and not counterproductive to the teaching-learning process. *EL*

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