

The American Public School Curriculum: Capitalist Tool or Instrument for Social Reform?

William C. Miller

This writer recommends "that educators come to grips with crucial issues and provide strong leadership designed to foster significant instructional improvement and dynamic curriculum change."

Socrates asserted that, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Educators should paraphrase this remark and maintain that, "The unexamined curriculum is not worth implementing." A basic question that boards, administration, faculty, parents, other citizens, and students should ask themselves is, "What do we want the product of our schools to be like?" If there are influences and pressures working against the ability of our schools to facilitate the desired characteristics in children and youth, they should be resisted. If there are forces that support achievement of priority goals, they should be welcomed.

Bowles and Gintis, in their provocative book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, propose a startling hypothesis.¹ They claim that our present educational system has not, does not, and cannot provide equality of educational opportunity. They assert that our public schools mirror the inherently unequal structure of our capitalist economy. These two radical economists claim that our educational system is a tool for reinforcing an authoritarian society, rather than a means of reform.

In their book, economic analysis and historical enquiry are used to support their hypothesis that schools foster and reward behaviors that are desired by business and industry. They argue that schools should be helping students learn ways to reform rather than conform to our society. The authors point out that getting ahead in school, like getting ahead in society, depends, to a great degree, on parental wealth and race.

More specifically, Bowles and Gintis present evidence that personality traits of "submission to authority" (students who identify with school, are consistent, punctual, dependable, externally motivated, and persistent), having the proper "temperament" (not aggressive, temperamental, frank, or creative, but rather, being predictable and tactful), and possessing "internalized control" (empathizing with orders and deferring gratification) are rewarded in school. They further claim that the only significantly penalized traits—creativity, independence, and aggressiveness—are precisely those that are incompatible with conformity to the hierachical division of labor.

If most educators objectively examined what is rewarded and what behavior is fostered in most schools by the overt and especially by the "hidden" curriculum, they would have to agree.² Despite our beautiful sounding philosophical statements, in which we proclaim we want to encourage creativity and independence, the life of a nonconforming student is hell!

Whether schools should be a force for maintaining the status quo or instruments for social change is not a new question.³ Almost any new educational thrust can be examined within this framework. Is the move toward career education simply a way of more deeply entrenching in the school curriculum the protestant work ethic and an effort to create a larger force of willing workers ready to fit in as cogs in the wheels of industry? Or is career education an opportunity for students to explore a wide variety of options and

¹ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1976.

² Benson R. Snyder. *The Hidden Curriculum*. New York: Knopf, Inc., 1970.

³ George S. Counts. *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* New York: John Day Co., 1932.

styles of living and to help them identify and clarify their life goals, even to the point of deciding the traditional "world of work" is not for them?

Curricular Responses to Realities

Obviously, the role of education is not an either/or matter. Schools have many purposes to accomplish and many publics to respond to. When the curriculum is examined, it must be looked at in light of some harsh current realities. For instance, what should be the curricular response to:

- *The shift to conservatism and other changing values and life styles.*

Probably no phenomenon will have greater impact on the curriculum than the American public's swing to the right. We are being pushed "back to the basics." We are faced with a taxpayers' revolt. The future of the Equal Rights Amendment looks bleak, as do "gay" rights and affirmative action programs. The gulf between races and between the "haves" and "have nots" may grow deeper. At the same time, we are seeing a greater variety of family forms and a wider range of life styles. Energy costs and shortages will cause dramatically different ways of living.

Have you and your staff examined the implications of these shifts for the curriculum?

- *Increasing dissatisfaction with and the decreasing utility of education.*

The present pressure for accountability and the rise of competency testing are evidence of the growing dissatisfaction with and distrust of education. In the view of many, the high expectations for and the faith our citizens have had in their schools have not been justified. They question the value of education, especially with its rapidly increasing costs. Much of what is offered in schools is seen by students and the public alike as irrelevant and, if gainful employment is the "bottom line," they may be right. No group is more disillusioned than the minority students, who, despite many obstacles, have "hung in there" to graduate from high school only to find there are no jobs and that the dropouts may have a year's head start on the few employment opportunities that exist. Higher education, once the door opener to success, is no longer such a valua-

ble asset in a society where there are many "overeducated" applicants for each position.

In light of these hard facts, have you examined the relevance of your school curriculum?

- *Student and staff attitudes and their impact on school climate.*

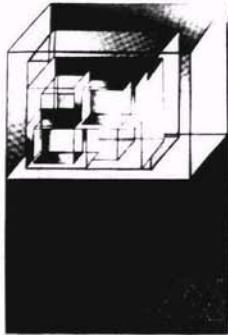
Many of our nation's schools are not happy places. Because of the factors already mentioned, many students question the value of education and some feel alienated and powerless. In some schools, both students and teachers fear for their safety. There is a noticeable lack of cohesion among some faculties. Schools are becoming more bureaucratic and the management of large, complex institutions causes feelings of depersonalization among staff and students. Declining enrollments and "pink slipping" have resulted in an aging staff badly in need of renewal, but without the influx of new teachers with fresh ideas. There is a growing rift between school "management" and school "labor." Staff contracts limit options, and peer pressure to conform to hard-won agreements limits individual choice. Individuals are less likely to volunteer for tasks, and decision making, more and more often, is following prescribed formal lines. More staff militancy is in evidence, and differences between boards of education and their administrators are more frequent. The conservative climate of the country and shortage of jobs have left little incentive to change or take risks. This results in schools where stress is high and where crisis management and little innovation prevail.

How can you and other curriculum workers break through this melange?

- *Increase in government control and the increasing politicalization of education.*

Governmental intervention through legislation or the courts has had a significant impact on the curriculum. We have compensatory and/or affirmative action programs for minorities and the handicapped. Legislative control of funds has impacted the direction and scope of national, state, and local educational institutions. Our congress has also become interested in very specific curricular activities, such as its investigation of "Man —A Course of Study." Outside funding has sometimes created parallel educational systems with similar programs being established through

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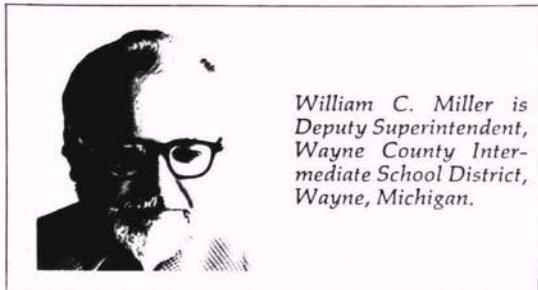
the use of various categorical funds. Indeed, large urban districts sometimes have sufficient funds for their compensatory education efforts, but not enough money for their "regular" programs or other activities identified locally as important.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicate that students' knowledge of the structure and function of American government has declined. This is true despite the growing impact of the government on our daily life, our privacy, and our freedom.

Is your district responding to this need?

As a first step in responding to these and the many other challenges that could be listed, curriculum decision-makers should work with groups broadly representative of the community to identify the purposes of education in their community. Next, staff, under the leadership of the curriculum person, should examine what is currently taking place in classrooms to see if practices are in line with curriculum priorities. When needed changes are identified, it will be necessary to build a climate of understanding, acceptance, and trust on the part of the community, parents, staff, and students.

Influences and pressures will always be with us. Identifying and dealing with them will become a way of life for educational leaders. They must learn to do so with skill and tact, and must marshal solid community support and understanding. It is also essential that educators come to grips with crucial issues and provide strong leadership designed to foster significant instructional improvement and dynamic curriculum change. Without these elements, schools will become a tool for the small but vocal groups that can bring the most pressure, rather than the instrument for improvement of society that most citizens desire. *EJ*



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