

Up the back stops here

Fire Protection for Innovative Programs¹

Gordon F. Vars

Core and other "soft" programs are vulnerable in the current climate. Evaluation, communication, and involvement can help save them.

The heat is on the public schools today, generated by demands for "back to the basics," competency testing, and accountability. Declining enrollments, tax revolts, and the general erosion of public support for education combine to raise the temperature in many schools to the kindling point. Especially vulnerable, as John Goodlad² points out, are the "soft and tender" humanistic programs like core curriculum, values clarification, affective education, student activities, and the like. Perhaps it is time to review some time-tested ways that schools can provide themselves with "educational fire insurance," or at least some means to reduce the "heat."

This article draws primarily upon experience with the perennially vulnerable interdisciplinary programs that fall under the rubric of core curriculum. Core curriculum is, by definition, student-centered, guidance-oriented, and problem-focused—all suspect in times of conservative reaction.³

Core has survived several conservative revolts in American education. Two of the more recent ones were in the 1950s during the McCarthy era and in the 1960s during the post-Sputnik hysteria over Russian successes in the space race. This one is not the last; no doubt history will continue to record cycles of conservatism and liberalism, doubt and confidence in education. John Goodlad's recent assessment sounds

¹ Adapted from an address given at the National Middle School Association convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 10, 1978.

² John I. Goodlad. "Can Our Schools Get Better?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 60: 343; January 1979.

³ John H. Lounsbury and Gordon F. Vars. *A Curriculum for the Middle School Years*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978. pp. 46, 56-70.

very much like a statement made in 1952 by Willard E. Givens, former Executive-Secretary of the National Education Association:

We can respond to the clamor of those who cry "go back to the fundamentals—to the Three R's." Some who raise this clamor have looked upon the world and do not find it cast in their own image. They blame the school for this aberration. They would cut education below the thinking level where the change called "progress" begins. They would restrict education to the simpler mental skills of reading, spelling, writing, numbers. We can do that. We can create degrees of fascinating skill in reading, penmanship, spelling, ciphering. And in two generations the American people would have little to read, write, or spell about.⁴

It seems as if education is much like the weather. If you do not like what you have right now, just wait a bit! But just waiting is not enough. What is needed is thorough *evaluation* of our educational efforts, careful *communication* of the data, and direct *involvement* of all interested parties.

Evaluation

Many years ago Harold Hand admonished educators to take out "fire insurance" any time they launched a program that was even a little different from the conventional. This insurance was to consist mostly of standardized test data to show there had been no substantial loss of student achievement in the basic skills.

To insure a program against unwarranted attacks, we need both concrete evidence of local student achievement and supporting research from similar programs at other times and places. A recent assessment of student achievement in the core classes of Omaha, Nebraska, provides evidence of their effectiveness. In Spring 1978, the California Achievement Test was administered to 3,878 eighth graders. Based on Lorge-Thorndike tests administered when the students were in sixth grade, they were expected to achieve a grade equivalence of 8.7. Actual mean grade equivalents were: Vocabulary—9.0; Reading Comprehension—9.1; Spelling—9.5; Language Mechanics—9.7; Language Expression—8.8; Reference Skills—9.5.⁵ Granting all the limitations of standardized testing, it is still reassuring to see that Omaha core students are doing better than expected in the basic skills.

These results parallel more than 30 years of research on the effectiveness of block-time, core, and interdisciplinary team programs. A recent bibliography lists more than 60 comparative studies and 15 normative studies.⁶ The evidence indicates that students in these programs do as well as, or better than, those in more conventional courses.

But let us not rely entirely on standardized testing. If we have an innovative program, it is up to us to measure outcomes on all pertinent dimensions. Since core is expected to enhance problem-solving and interpersonal skills, paper-and-pencil tests should be supplemented with observations, structured group tasks, simulations, and student and parent questionnaires. In short, we need to evaluate *all* the various outcomes of education—skills, concepts, and attitudes, and their application in real life.

In addition to schoolwide or districtwide achievement data, we must have plenty of concrete evidence on the progress of each student. The traditional report card is far from adequate. We need to keep folders of student work, so that parents, students, and teachers can compare performance at the beginning of the year with current performance. We need to send plenty of materials home—test papers, compositions, artwork, all kinds of projects.

Attitudes and opinions of students are also vitally important—and not only those of present students. Follow-up studies are a must. How are our "graduates" doing at the next school level? In college? How do they view their experiences in our school from the vantage point of a few years' more experience? The usual approach is to distribute a questionnaire, but there is no substitute for the personal interview, even if it must be done by telephone. People are more likely to respond to a personal contact, and this personal touch also communicates that we care about our students, an important factor in maintaining support for the public schools by both present and future parents.

Surveys should not be limited to former students. We should sample public opinion continuously, so we are not caught by surprise when someone questions what we are doing, or, equally damaging, when we fail to initiate needed programs because we think the public would object. Conducting an opinion poll is a good project for students, with excellent learning opportunities in mathematics, social studies, English, and human relations. And again, all these surveys communicate to everyone involved that we care about their opinions, a great plus for public relations.

⁴ Willard E. Givens, from an address given at the 1952 convention of the American Association of School Administrators. In: M. Dale Baughman. *Teacher's Treasury of Stories for Every Occasion*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1958. p. 87.

⁵ Information supplied by Evelyn Y. Brown, formerly Core Supervisor, Omaha Public Schools.

⁶ Gordon F. Vars. "Bibliography of Research on the Effectiveness of Block-Time, Core, and Interdisciplinary Team Teaching Programs." Kent, Ohio: National Association for Core Curriculum, 1978.

Communication

Gathering information through various evaluation procedures provides some fire insurance, but fire prevention is also vital. A first step is to *communicate* to everyone involved through all appropriate means.

The most important communication medium we have is the students. We must not only make sure that each class is meaningful and relevant to our students, but help them to formulate adequate answers to the perennial parent question, "What did you learn in school today?" They must not only know *what* they are learning, but *why*.

Students also are expected to carry home all kinds of written communications, which they do with wide variations in reliability. One hundred percent delivery may be impossible, but students are more likely to be conscientious in this matter if they see the value of the communication and are not threatened by it. This suggests strongly that students should be involved in deciding both what will be reported and how, an important element in the innovative student progress reporting carried out in some schools.

Fellow teachers and other staff members are also important communications media. Do we keep everyone in our building informed of what we are up to? How do we talk about our colleagues outside of school? Do we keep our disagreements and complaints within the professional community? The usual chit-chat and blowing off steam that takes place in the teachers' lounge really communicates little about the significant work we are all doing. Except in team teaching situations, most educators work essentially alone. And, since people tend to be down on what they are not up on, colleagues may fail to support us when we need them the most, unless we keep them informed. There should be workshops and seminars in which teachers are encouraged to share both their successes and their problems. Departmental and schoolwide faculty meetings should provide for inter-staff communication.

Next to teachers and students, the parents of our present students are closest to the situation and best able to spread the word about our programs. The typical back-to-school night is only a small beginning. Homeroom parent meetings, with the students helping to plan them and participating in their execution, are a time-tested means of getting our message across. This is easier in a self-contained or core arrangement, of course, where one teacher may have only 30 to 60 different families to reach.

These sessions should go beyond mere talk to get the parents actively involved in activities similar to those their children are experiencing. A core teacher in Lexington, Kentucky, had so many parents at one of her meetings that they overflowed the classroom

and had to sit on the floor in the hallway. When she returned to Lexington five years later, one of the parents remarked, "I'll never forget the night we sat on the floor and did those interaction games with you."

Direct face-to-face communication with parents is especially important in dealing with a controversial subject like sex. Teachers who ask parents how they want questions on this topic handled almost invariably are urged to give full, frank answers—keeping in mind the maturity of the student.

Individual parent conferences are also valuable ways to communicate what the school is doing, in addition to reporting an individual student's progress. Here, again, a self-contained or core framework gives the teacher fewer conferences to conduct. But the team parent conferences that are possible with interdisciplinary teams save much teacher time and have tremendous benefits. Parents can talk with four or five of their child's teachers at once, and all members of the teaching team hear and can act upon the same parent input.

Direct communication with the community at large is a little more difficult, but such events as the Academic Fairs conducted at Crosby Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky, present the school program for all who care to visit. Otherwise we must rely on indirect communication, to be discussed later.

One segment of the community that we must make special efforts to reach is made up of our colleagues teaching in other schools. Ignorant or hostile high school staff members may undermine many of the good things being done in the middle school, for example. A team evaluating a core program in New York state was aghast at the comments made by some high school teachers. The top administration of the system should *require* all high school staff to attend orientation meetings at the middle school, just as middle school staff should attend similar sessions at their feeder elementary school buildings. Just getting together is not enough, of course, especially if the chief agenda item consists of complaints about how poorly prepared the students are when they come to the next school level. There must be genuine dialogue about what is best for students. The goal is to achieve some uniformity of curriculum throughout the district while maintaining freedom for each school to develop programs that seem best for that staff and student body. Staff members working in different schools at the same level also need to get together.

Although personal contact is vital, we must not neglect print and the mass media. How many schools have a small brochure that communicates to parents and others the essence of their programs and philosophy? The one prepared by Kimpton Middle School in Ohio is an excellent example. It describes the school's

interdisciplinary team organization, suggests how parents can help their children through the transescent period, and briefly summarizes a few school policies. Note the tone of this brief excerpt:

We hope that as a student or parent you will make an effort to be a positive, active contributor to the improvement of your team, as our structure is designed to best help you, but needs your input to operate at peak efficiency. Be a participant; our goal is to see that no one sits on the bench educationally, socially, emotionally. *We want you involved!*⁷



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The public also should have access to complete school handbooks, curriculum guides, schedules, and other documents. These should be neatly bound and placed in the community public library. Additional copies could be given to local newspaper editors, radio and television station program directors, and other key people such as PTA officials. They should be updated every year or two. Too often the only information about the public schools that is readily accessible in the community is the high school yearbook, hardly an adequate picture.

Most schools distribute periodical newsletters or bulletins to parents and community members. But check the readability level. Make sure the message is as clear as possible and free from educationese.

Student publications are another medium, and here we encounter the problem of freedom of speech and student rights. Educators have a right to insist that student newspapers, literary annuals, and yearbooks truly represent students and programs at their best. Students should have the opportunity to say

what they wish, within the limits of common decency, but there is no excuse for badly written publications.

Radio and television productions, many done by the students, are another good way to get our story across. Here again, educators have a responsibility to monitor the quality of the production while not censoring the opinions expressed.

Involvement

Even more important for ensuring that programs are understood and supported is direct *involvement*. Student involvement in all aspects of the learning process is the best way to make sure they will be good ambassadors. They should share in setting goals, selecting content, determining learning strategies, and evaluating outcomes.

Parents should work with us to identify student needs and to evaluate the effectiveness of our programs. The emphasis is on sharing, not dictating. Parents, community members, and fellow educators from all levels can be invaluable resources in the study of almost any topic. A community resources file can be developed by parent or grandparent volunteers for the benefit of the entire school system. A true open door policy, in which any community member is welcome to visit, observe, or participate in the activities of the school, is a vital necessity.

Conclusion

These demands may seem overwhelming. The cost of "fire insurance" and "fire prevention" may appear prohibitive, but it is not necessary to do everything described in order to provide adequate "coverage." If we believe in democracy, we must have faith that, when adequately informed, people will usually do what is best. We educators should do our part by evaluating our programs, communicating with all our publics, and involving them directly in the education enterprise. *EZ*

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