

# How State Mandates Affect Curriculum

Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship\*

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How, if at all, do teachers and administrators find out about state curriculum mandates? What do educators think of the mandates, and how much are they influenced by them in planning and carrying out courses and units?

To answer questions of this sort, we conducted a study of curriculum laws and regulations and how they are perceived in five states—Texas, Illinois, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and California. First, our staff looked carefully at the laws, regulations, and state department of education documents in each state—especially those calling for law-related education. Then our interviewers asked a group of social studies teachers a series of questions designed to probe their awareness of the mandates and to determine the extent to which they

thought the mandates had influenced teaching and learning.

There are several ways for mandates (laws and regulations) to reach teachers. Mandated topics might filter down to teachers through established district courses, standard syllabuses, state-approved texts, or state department of education curriculum guides, and teachers could teach these topics without being aware that they are mandated. Or teachers and their supervisors might be systematically informed of the mandates and consciously implement them. We do not know to what extent mandates filter down, but it appears that educators are not systematically informed of them. Our findings suggest that some information is conveyed through formal courses, some from

the administrative hierarchy, and some from educators' general experience including conversations with colleagues or the way things have always been done in the school.

A significant source is teachers' experience on the job. Twenty-eight percent said they picked up information on the mandates while teaching, counseling, administering a project, revising the curriculum, or, as a teacher from southern Illinois told us, "somewhere along the line." Many teachers who said they picked up information informally on the job did not remember who told them. When asked how he had become aware of the mandates, a California teacher told us, "I'll be damned if I know." A teacher from a Chicago suburb responded, "It's common knowledge."

The largest number of teachers, 43 percent, learned from administrators in their district. They credited their department head, curriculum orientations, or handbooks distributed by their schools. This proportion differs considerably by state. Sixty-three percent of Georgia teachers credited the administration, but only 26 percent of Pennsylvania teachers did. A large proportion of the interviewed administrators (40 percent) said they had done nothing to acquaint teachers with curriculum mandates.

Most education administrators begin their careers as teachers. If they are like the teachers in our sample, they have obtained rather spotty information about the social studies mandates from administrators and other teachers. Now that they have become administrators, they may pass on this information to another generation of teachers.

\*Excerpted from *Mandate for Change: The Impact of Law on Educational Innovation*, published in December 1979 by the American Bar Association, the Social Science Education Consortium, and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management. Edited by Charles J. White, III, of the ABA's Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship, *Mandate for Change* is a report of the findings of a 1974-78 study conducted by YEFC for the Ford Foundation. The book is available for \$9.95 from any of the three organizations mentioned above (paperbound; 315 pp.).

Looking at the whole process, we get a sense of the mandates as a kind of lore passed on by successive generations of administrators and teachers.

There is a much more formal process to inform teachers and administrators of *changes* in the mandates. When teachers were asked how they became aware of changes, 81 percent gave administrators as a source for such information, about twice as many as credited administrators with informing them of the mandates themselves.

### The Influence of State Mandates

Teachers and administrators say the mandates have some effect, although the extent apparently varies from state to state. In response to our inquiries about law-related education, the most striking differences were between Texas and the other four states. Teachers in our Texas sample were far more likely to say that law-related education originated with state requirements and far less likely to say they made the crucial decisions themselves. Half of our respondents said they played no role in developing law-related offerings. They "covered the text," which had been selected from a short list of state approved books. They did not develop separate and distinct courses because it was difficult to find places for them in the state-prescribed curriculum.

Georgia, like Texas but unlike the other three states in our sample, has a statewide list of textbooks that are "acceptable." Because the books are screened, teachers may tend to accept the texts as the approved program, including what the texts include and excluding what the texts exclude.

In Illinois the state has taken a different approach to regulating part of the social studies curriculum. It requires students to pass a "Constitution Test," thus requiring a certain amount of material

to be developed on the Illinois constitution and the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. Though the tests are developed locally and teachers encouraged to teach the subject according to their own interests some Illinois teachers see this mandate as the origin of law studies.

In Pennsylvania and California, teachers generally do not report that the mandates have influenced law studies even though law-related education is explicitly recognized by statute in California as part of the social studies. The California findings may be in part because the mandate is new (1974), and in part because it has no action component—no mandated course, graduation requirement, or statewide test.

When interviewers asked teachers and administrators about the general effect of the mandates, they found some interesting variations state by state. In California, where the mandates are unspecific, a high of 52 percent of the teachers said they ignored them. No Californians said they were limited by the mandates. By contrast, in Georgia and Illinois, where the mandates are quite specific, lows of 36 percent said they ignored them. These same states had the largest proportion who said they teach the subjects because they are required.

Figure 1 shows how the whole sample (that is, the five state totals) perceived the effects of the mandates. Some educators thought social studies mandates had not influenced teaching at all. Some respondents gave the interviewers short answers such as, "No way," "Haven't," and "None." Others, like a teacher in a middle-sized Texas city, told us, "I pick the ones I want and like; the rest I just forget about." Another from California said, "They have a minimal effect. There is no enforcement. No one checks."

Administrators are less likely than teachers to say that mandates have no effect, and they are more likely to see the mandates as a minimum requirement leaving room for a great number of local options. A Pennsylvania principal said,

Until we wised up, they were sort of limiting, but it was just us. What happens is we became tradition bound. They came out with the title "World History," and we taught the course World History. But we've realized that there is actually a lot of flexibility in 9-to-18-week courses. We can cover more interesting topics that are still under the umbrella of the law.

At the other extreme, less than a fifth of teachers and administrators said that topics were specifi-



The Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship is a special committee of the American Bar Association. Joel Henning (top, left), Project Director. For the study of state mandates, Michael Sorgen (top, right) was legal researcher; Leigh Stelzer (bottom, left) was empirical researcher; and Charles J. White, III, (bottom, right) was editor.

Figure 1. How Teachers and Administrators (Superintendents and Principals) Perceived the Influence of Social Studies Mandates on Teaching\*

Influence of Social Studies Mandates	Teachers (N = 197)	Administrators (N = 96)
<b>No Influence</b>		
They have no influence.	43 percent	25 percent
<b>Some Influence</b>		
• Mandates reinforce teaching. The subjects would be taught anyway.	12	10
• Mandates help by telling what is expected.	13	13
• Mandates tell what is expected but leave a lot of room for additions.	16	24
<b>Considerable Influence</b>		
• The subjects are taught because they are required.	17	17
• Mandates limit teaching by requiring subjects that are not always relevant or important.	3	4
<b>Other</b>	5	7

\*Percentages add up to more than 100% because some respondents gave more than one answer.

cally included in response to state requirements.

Perhaps some teachers told us a little more than they intended when they praised the state requirements. A teacher in the San Antonio area told us, "I abide by them and I agree that they are good. They tell you when there should be changes or additions to a course." A teacher in the Atlanta area told us how state requirements had changed his life:

I've become more aware of social problems. They have increased my understanding of the relationship between the state, local, national, and international government. I've taken more interest since I've been teaching social studies. Since it's a state re-

quirement, a lot of emphasis is put on it. I don't see why world history is a requirement.

In general, educators said they did not think social studies mandates were a major factor in shaping the curriculum. Many said they ignored them. But about two-thirds felt the mandates had some effect—helping, directing, reinforcing, requiring. When we asked teachers familiar with the mandates if they were "very important, moderately important, of minor importance, or not important at all to what you teach and how you teach," one-third said they were very important. (Again, the proportions were greater in Georgia

and Texas.) Another one-third said they were moderately important, and the final one-third said they were of minor or no importance.

The data suggest that teachers do not see the mandates as an imposition. On the contrary, those who report an effect are more likely to see it as beneficial. By a three-to-one margin, teachers and administrators suggested the mandates helped their teaching or supported a sound curriculum.

### No Change

Finally, interviewers asked respondents, "If you had the opportunity, how might you change the state social studies requirements?" The single most frequent response of both teachers (25 percent) and administrators (43 percent) was "no change." There seems to be little consensus about suggested changes, with responses all over the field.

All in all, then, teachers and administrators reported being rather comfortable with their states' mandates. They are not fully aware of them and do not think mandates have a very strong influence, but they support the *idea* of mandates.

Since legislatures do not seem inclined to eliminate mandates—in fact they are generally adding to them—and since teachers are not dissatisfied with them, mandates will probably be a part of the education landscape for some time to come. *ET*

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