

Re-evaluating Courses for the Comprehensive High School

Philip E. Gates



A 46-member commission that reviewed every course in the Scottsdale high schools recommended new graduation requirements and a way to protect curriculum priorities.

Contemplate a "comprehensive" high school that offers the equivalent of three years of home economics, but no physics; jazz band, but no orchestra; and science fiction literature, but no geography.

Absurd? Yes. Impossible? No.

We in the secondary schools have not had to identify in specific terms what a comprehensive course of study actually is. In this relatively expansive period of our history, nobody has been particularly pressed to answer the question, "What constitutes a comprehensive course of studies?"

Recently, however, the decline in the elementary school population has finally reached the high schools. Between 1972 and 1982, elementary and high school enrollments will have declined 11 percent, down five million young people. As enrollments and corresponding revenues have decreased, so have the number of courses. But the million dollar question is "Which courses are to be cut?" If there were a universally accepted definition of a "comprehensive high school," this question would be much easier to answer. So far, the following factors have helped determine what courses will be taught:

- The state legislature, local school board, and regional colleges and universities have mandated certain courses to be taught all students. These have become required courses. Typically they have included core subject courses, but usually have ignored the fine arts, practical arts, foreign languages, and so on. These latter areas are usually covered in the elective program, which means they have been most expendable. So much for a comprehensive program.

- Special interest groups have pushed for more course offerings in their areas. Business leaders clamor for more economics. Athletic boosters want more physical education. Fine arts councils want more music and drama. Still other groups call for just the opposite: less physical education, health, and music. Too often, these tugs-of-war have been won by the heavyweights with the most prestige, power, or pull.

- Some departments have offered wider varieties of elective courses than others. Consequently, the "elective departments" have appealed to the larger number of students who are attracted by elective course packages. An English or social studies depart-

ment, for example, can offer 15 or 20 courses of one title one semester, and another 15 or 20 second term. Availability of more courses ensures a greater number of students to be taught in those areas. Another trick has been to tie a less popular course together with a more popular one and require that they be taken in a package deal.

- Farsighted staff have found ways to increase their student clientele: increase prerequisite course requirements; hyphenate single semester courses to include a second semester course; include a required course of 9 to 18 weeks in a 36-week elective course. Advisors for student councils, newspapers, and yearbooks have required one or more courses that must be taken concurrently with the club activity. Athletes have been told they must participate in out-of-season training sessions by enrolling in certain physical education courses.

- Tenure or seniority of staff members has dictated what courses are taught in elective areas. As a staff is reduced the most tenured teachers stay, so their courses are retained. The less experienced teachers go, and so do their courses.

- Facilities have also dictated which courses are continued and which are not. A business practice course in which there has been a heavy financial investment in a set of standard business machines has had a better chance of being continued than a course requiring no overhead other than a classroom with chalk. In this situation, gym, industrial arts, home economics, band, art, business education, and science have had the edge on math, English, social studies, and foreign language.

Establishment of a Study Commission

Anticipating a rapidly declining school population and aware of some of the program problems it might create, the Scottsdale Board of Trustees mandated a total review of its high school program of studies. A 46-member commission was appointed to make recommendations to the board within three years on what should be included in a comprehensive course of studies.

The commission consisted of 15 students elected

by their peers (three from each of the five high schools); 15 parents appointed by the president of the executive board of the district's parent teacher council (three from each high school); and 15 teachers, counselors, and administrators appointed by the administration. Each served as a voting member. The forty-sixth member, who chaired the group, was the assistant superintendent for secondary education. Attendance was taken at all meetings, and chronically absent members were replaced. All meetings were conducted in public, and visitors were permitted to participate in discussions. Business was conducted according to Robert's Rules of Order. Members were assured that initial recommendations passed by majority would be reconsidered at least two additional times prior to an eventual ratification vote. Also, as peripheral but important items came up, they were put on a "hold" list and discussed at a later date. These parameters helped relieve members of apprehensions that their areas of concern would be brushed aside.

Strict adherence to these guidelines was critical to the eventual success of the commission study. Once sessions began, they were wide open. Divergent points of view were expressed. Discussions were free-wheeling, articulate, dull, exciting, even humorous on occasion. Emotions peaked. Participants often became frustrated in failing to win support for their personal points of view when they were exposed to the perceptive scrutiny of the group. Various special interest groups argued in support of retention or expansion of their areas of particular concern. Staff groups challenged the commission's authority, questioning its qualifications to make curriculum decisions in areas in which it had no experience. Despite these factors, throughout the three-year effort, the commission managed to maintain a businesslike posture, making difficult decisions with integrity. As one astute commission member observed in retrospect: "We took the politics out of educational decision making."

Review Format

The format for the review included the following step-by-step procedures:

1. *Establishment of a common background.* In

September 1976 a written mandate from the Board of Trustees ordering the program review was presented to the commission. Written copies of the district philosophy of education; postgraduate follow-up results; community needs survey responses; North Central Accreditation Association visitation reports; and achievement, ACT, and SAT test scores were reviewed in oral presentations to the group.

2. *Creation of an agreed-upon frame of reference for evaluating the net worth of each high school course.* A "Course Rating Sheet" was discussed and approved by the commission. The course rating sheet included five broad areas and a set of 31 criteria: (a) Levels of Appropriateness (conforms to school district philosophy of education, meets the requirements of the scope and sequence, and so on); (b) Content Validity (written course goals are available, curriculum materials relate to course goals and objectives, course contributes to the development of the larger subject matter discipline in which it belongs, and so on); (c) Course Effectiveness (students successfully completing the course have acquired basic skills in reading, writing, and/or computation; students successfully completing course have acquired or refined skills that can be used to earn a living and/or take care of themselves throughout life, and so on); (d) Resource Availability (qualified teachers, required texts/materials/equipment, and so on); (e) Budget Support (teachers, support staff, facilities, and so on). Each course was ranked "high," "low," "medium," or "not applicable" on each criterion.

After the presentation of the courses for the first subject area, industrial arts, commission members recognized that the process was too cumbersome. After that, they decided to analyze each course with those criteria appropriate for the particular course under study. A set of course descriptions including course titles, primary content focus, prerequisites, ability level, and grade level were distributed for all courses.

3. *Organization of a schedule for considering all 350 courses representing 12 disciplines.* There were seven "rounds" of activity engaged in by the commission. These activities and the approximate amount of time taken for each included:

- Round #1 (25 sessions)—A course-by-course presentation was made by department heads and subject matter teachers. This was followed by discussion and formulation of first draft recommendations. Typically this took two evening sessions per subject area.
- Round #2 (ten sessions)—All of the tentative recommendations were reviewed collectively within the context of the complete first draft. Focus here was on relationships between departments, program balance (for example, adequate number of offerings per

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subject, adequate number of levels of courses, balance between college preparation and vocational courses, and so on). Second draft recommendations were then proposed, discussed, and approved.

• Round #3 (two sessions, two and a half hours)—Public hearings were held. Individuals from the community were invited to comment on any of the second draft recommendations, which had been distributed to all high school staff. Specific times were scheduled for each subject area upon request. Most of those who chose to speak were teacher groups. In all cases those who presented reactions to the second draft recommendations spoke against those that threatened their vested interests. The hearings included teacher presentations and appeals to recommendations in eight subject matter areas.

• Round #4 (two sessions)—Hearing presentations were reviewed by the commission. A third draft of recommendations was discussed and approved. Important changes were made in two subject matter areas in draft three as a result of the hearings.

• Round #5 (one session)—Ratification of the final document was considered. The vote was unanimous, one of only two unanimous votes by the commission throughout its three-year life span.

• Round #6 (one session, three hours)—An informal work session was held with the Board of

Trustees. Members of the public and the board asked questions and commented about various aspects of the report. At least two teachers' groups appealed to the board for alterations in the commission's recommendations.

• Round #7 (one session)—The final presentation of the recommendations was made to the Board of Trustees. Three amendments to the commission report were initiated and approved by the board before it unanimously approved the final document in its entirety.

The Net Result

Major changes that will be implemented as the result of the approval of the commission's recommendations include the following:

1. The present 20 units required for graduation will be retained, but the number of required courses will increase from nine to 11 units. The two new required units are one unit in practical arts (industrial arts, business education, or home economics), and one unit in humanities (foreign language or fine arts—music, art, dance, or drama).

2. All 350 courses have been put in priority order within three broad categories. This will enable the district to identify courses that must be taught in order to retain a comprehensive program ("Requisite Courses"); courses that are to be offered at registration time but taught only if there are a minimum of 20 students per section enrolled ("Standard Courses"); and courses that are desirable but not necessary ("Optional Elective Courses"). Optional electives will be offered only if there is staff available after all requisite and standard course requirements have been met. Spanish I, II, III, and IV, for example, have been declared requisite courses. French I, II, and III; German I and II; and Latin I and II are standard courses. French IV; German III and IV; and Latin III and IV are optional electives. It is the intention of the commission that no standard courses may be staffed in any of five district schools until all requisite courses have been adequately staffed in all high schools. Also,

no optional elective course may be staffed until all standard courses that meet board prescribed minimum enrollments have been staffed. The consequence of this is that some electives with larger enrollments will have to defer to smaller-sized standard courses.

3. Four years of English classes have been assigned requisite classification, thereby assuring every student who needs four years of English (even though the district requires only three for graduation) will get it *no matter how small the high school becomes*. Similar program guarantees as prescribed by the requisite listing include four years of a foreign language, science, math, and music; three years of industrial arts, home economics, and business education; three years of social studies, a semester of driver/health education, one year of physical education, and two years of a vocational education program at the technical school. It is important to note that "requisite courses" are not synonymous with "required courses." Students do not have to enroll in requisite courses, but they are assured that the courses will be available should they need them.

Other Amendments

At its final meeting on the matter, the board made some changes in the final document, including requiring a minimum of 20 students in a requisite course section before it can be offered.

That definitely runs counter to what the commission was attempting to do; that is, to make absolutely certain that courses deemed essential to a comprehensive program be taught no matter how small the school population might become. In the commission's view, failure to offer the requisite courses is a failure to offer a comprehensive high school program.

The board evidently decided that was too big a jump to take. Instead, by virtue of its vote, the board invoked the district standard of 20 students minimum per course section for all courses. Should one of the requisite offerings fall below that, the board has the option of reviewing the matter individually. At that time it will have the option to fund the undersubscribed course or to rule that it is not part of the comprehensive program of studies as defined by the commission. If students in a particular high school cannot be afforded a comprehensive program of studies, serious consideration to closing that high school is in order.

Regardless, the new graduation requirements have survived. Vested interests have been put aside. Student's needs have been paramount. The integrity of the high school course of study will remain intact even during economically adverse times. EZ



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