

News Notes

Robert C. McKean and Bob L. Taylor

Los Angeles Schools Move to Centralize Curriculums

"New instructional guidelines . . . will bring about a more highly structured approach to junior and senior high school curriculums," says an article in *Spotlight* published by the Office of Communications, Los Angeles Unified School District. The guidelines do reflect a move away from decentralization since individual schools will no longer be able to determine the content of courses that satisfy graduation requirements. However, the statement developed by the K-12 Instructional Council does provide for individual high schools to augment the required program with two required courses of their own, the content of which can be determined by local needs.

Chief features of the guidelines include:

- A core curriculum consisting of required courses that must be completed successfully by all secondary school students;
- Increased academic requirements;
- Developing an entry level job skill by all high school students;
- Reduction in the number and type of courses that can meet core curriculum requirements and a more structured method of granting approval for alternative courses.

Although they do not change the number of credits required for graduation, the guidelines do mandate specific sequences in English, social studies, mathematics, health, physical education, and fine and practical arts. Pamphlets have been prepared that outline the new requirements and list specific course titles along with outlines covering the content for each subject.

Persons seeking information related to these guidelines and the pamphlets describing them should write to the K-12 Instructional Council c/o *Spotlight*, Internal Communi-

cations Unit, Office of Communications, Los Angeles Unified School District, 450 N. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90012.

Tailored Testing by Computer

Educational Testing Service is experimenting with a new concept in testing, "Computerized Adaptive Testing (CAT)." This is an experimental verbal aptitude test that researchers are administering to students through school terminals hooked up to an ETS computer in Princeton, New Jersey. Unlike the conventional paper-and-pencil tests, CAT depends on a computer to select items specially suited to the individual student.

The test is only 25 items in length for any examinee, and it can measure ability over a broad range from fifth grade to graduate school. Since it is stored in a computer, the test can be administered anytime the teacher wishes. The concept is that people may be tested more effectively with fewer questions and in less time if each examinee is given only those items appropriate to his/her level of ability. The test is tailored to each examinee as it is being taken, and it provides a better measurement because items are not either too difficult or too easy. The response of the examinee to the test is more positive because it is pitched at the right level of difficulty.

Researchers have demonstrated that the 25-item CAT is as effective as the usual test of twice that length. This is because of CAT's adaptability; it permits measurement above and below the range of the conventional test. Adaptive tests can be made much shorter without compromising measurement capacity; hence, they require less time to administer.

The process is like this. A student, seated at a computer terminal, reads multiple-choice questions on the screen and responds by punching the keyboard letter that represents the

answer. Every time a question is answered, the computer scores it and evaluates the pattern of right and wrong responses on all previous questions. With this information, an estimate is made of the student's ability, and the selection of the next item is based on this estimate each time. The score on an adaptive test represents the ability level of the test-taker based on all 25 items rather than the number of correct responses.

Advantages to the approach are that students may take as much time as they wish responding to items; each test is different in that it is tailored to the individual student so it can not be passed on; students can receive immediate feedback on the correctness of their response; and students and teacher have an immediate score at the end of the test.

If you desire more information, contact: Research Technology Development Group, ETS, Princeton, New Jersey 08541.

Oral History: A Powerful Teaching Technique

Students at the Thomas A. Edison Middle School in Boston are learning history outside the textbook. According to an article in *Common Wealth*, a newsletter published by the Bureau of Educational Information Services of the Massachusetts Department of Education, these boys



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and girls visited the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center for the Aged in Roslindale and conducted interviews with the elderly residents. The culmination of the project was a 22-page publication complete with the text of the interviews, the students' feelings and reactions to the experience, and photographs of the interview sessions.

At Newton High School a group of seniors used oral history—talking to people who have significant input. Social studies teacher Ernest Wright arranged for his class to study the social history of Boston's North End and Beacon Hill through interviews with the elderly and the teenagers who live there. From the interviews, the students wrote their own history book to be used by future classes.

Encouraging the use of oral history is a goal of the VOICES Project located at the Greater Boston Regional Center in Cambridge. According to the Project directors, students can interview people in their own communities. Much can be learned about the history and customs of different ethnic groups or about one aspect of

history such as immigration, the Depression, or WW II, since the subjects of the interviews have experiences that they are asked to talk about.

Oral history is also a way for students to improve language skills. As they prepare a book or pamphlet, develop a slide show, put together a videotape presentation, or plan a puppet show, students gain interviewing skills, practice letter writing, and learn how to organize information for their own use or to share with others.

"Oral history," according to Ellen Sarkisian, "is a very powerful teaching technique because, in addition to enlivening history, it helps break down communication barriers between people in a community."

For further information, contact the VOICES Project, Greater Boston Regional Center, 54 Rindge Avenue Extension, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139.

Mini-Course in Phonics for Parents

The PTA of the Thiensville-Mequon Schools (Wisconsin) are

sponsoring workshops for parents in phonics. Since many parents learned to read by the look-say method, the idea of the workshop is to acquaint the parents with an awareness of the philosophy, texts, and approaches being used in their children's reading program.

The contents of the hour-and-one-half workshop starts with the procedure for attacking an unknown word. The steps are: (a) Start with the context and examine it for contextual clues; (b) Look at the work carefully from left to right; (c) Examine the word's structural characteristics; (d) Divide the word into syllables and try to pronounce it; (e) Establish the vowel sounds and attempt to pronounce them; (f) Sound out all the letters; and (g) Refer to the dictionary. Stress in the session is placed on the last two or three decoding skills in the list. The workshop objective is not for the parents to become home tutors but to make them aware of the method being used to teach their children how to decode words.

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