

High School Curriculum in Illinois

William Humm and Robert L. Buser



Nearly everyone has opinions about high school curriculum, but facts about it are scarce; there hasn't been a detailed national survey of course offerings since 1973. Accurate information about courses, enrollments, and scheduling practices is essential for anyone who wants to understand contemporary secondary education. Moreover, principals and curriculum leaders want such information to help them make curriculum decisions for their own schools.

For these reasons the state of Illinois conducted a comprehensive survey of high school course offerings in the 1976-77 school year. That year was particularly significant because it was the year of peak enrollment in Illinois public high schools, so it provides an ex-

A detailed survey of secondary schools in one state found a superfluity of course titles, low enrollments in foreign languages, and fewer academic than other courses.

cellent benchmark for the enrollment declines projected for the future.

Illinois is a large, diverse state. Senior high schools in the study ranged in size from fewer than 100 to over 4,800 students with a median enrollment of slightly over 500. The number of small schools (fewer than 500) exceeded the number of large schools (1,700 or larger) by more than two to one, but the large schools enrolled almost three-quarters of the students of the state while the smaller

schools enrolled only about 15 percent.

Subject Offerings and Enrollments

The high school curriculum can be viewed from two perspectives: course offerings and course enrollments. Course offerings are an indication of the scope of the curriculum because students cannot enroll in subjects that are not available to them. However, course enrollments reflect both the offerings and the subjects students ac-

tually choose to take. We will report both perspectives but high-light enrollment patterns.

Course Offerings

Over 2,000 course titles were identified in the study and, as would be expected, the typical (median) number of course offerings varied by school size. The typical offerings ranged from 58 courses in schools of less than 200 students to 153 courses for schools of 2,600 or more. The typical number of offerings for schools of 200 to 499 students was 72; for schools of 500 to 999, 94; for schools of 1,000 to 1,699, 120; and for schools of 1,700 to 2,599, 132.

The subject areas with the largest share of all course offerings within the schools were English (16 percent), industrial arts (12 percent), social studies (12 percent), and natural sciences (9 percent). These were followed by mathematics, business, home economics, and foreign languages, with each accounting for approximately six percent of the titles offered.

The typical high school curriculum was composed of tradi-

tional academic courses (social studies, English, foreign languages, sciences, and mathematics) 44 percent; vocationally related (agriculture, business, home economics, and industrial arts) 36 percent; arts related (music and art) eight percent; and health, physical, and driver education, eight percent. The typical ranges of offerings from the smallest (under 200 students) to the largest (2,600 and over) schools, were 26 to 71 in the academic area, 20 to 49 in the vocationally related, and four to 13 in the arts. The health-physical-driver education areas held constant at seven for all school sizes.

Course Enrollments

Another way to view the high school curriculum is the portion of students actually enrolled in the respective subject areas. Figure 1 shows the distribution of selected enrollments by subject area and school size indexed to English enrollments. The median number of offerings is indicated in parenthesis.

A threshold effect is noted for offerings and enrollments as schools approach 1,000 in size. Al-

though the number of courses continues to increase, it increases more slowly. In other words, there are greater differences in offerings between schools of from 200 to 1,000 students than between schools of from 1,000 to 2,600 or more students.

Subject-Related Findings

Among findings related to specific subject areas:

- Almost ten percent of the schools, typically the smaller ones, did not offer an art course, so over 20,000 students had no opportunity to enroll in art in 1976-77.

- Agriculture offerings were inversely related to school size, with smaller schools offering appreciably more courses and enrolling greater numbers of students than the larger schools. Almost half of the students attended schools with no offering in agriculture.

- Home economics enrollments, like agriculture, varied inversely with school size.

- The most popular foreign languages were in descending order of course enrollment: Spanish,

Figure 1. Course Enrollments in Percents* by Subject Area and School Size With Median Offerings in Parenthesis

Subject Area	<200	200-499	500-999	1000-1699	1700-2599	2600 and up
English	100 (8)	100 (9)	100 (12)	100 (15)	100 (17)	100 (19)
Physical Education	95 (4)	95 (4)	95 (4)	94 (4)	103 (4)	95 (5)
Social Sciences	66 (5)	67 (6)	61 (7)	71 (9)	66 (11)	68 (13)
Mathematics	58 (6)	58 (6)	58 (7)	58 (8)	61 (10)	61 (11)
Natural Science	63 (5)	67 (6)	52 (6)	50 (8)	53 (9)	53 (11)
Business	44 (6)	45 (8)	50 (11)	52 (14)	48 (17)	48 (18)
Industrial Arts	23 (4)	29 (7)	36 (12)	36 (13)	33 (16)	33 (17)
Music	39 (2)	34 (2)	26 (3)	20 (5)	23 (6)	22 (7)
Foreign Languages	9 (2)	13 (3)	17 (5)	24 (11)	27 (13)	28 (15)
Home Economics	16 (2)	16 (3)	15 (4)	18 (5)	21 (6)	20 (8)
Special Education	2 (0)	5 (0)	9 (4)	10 (5)	9 (6)	8 (7)
Agriculture	21 (4)	16 (5)	9 (4)	3 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)

* Indexed to English with a 100 percent enrollment.

"Accurate information about courses, enrollments, and scheduling practices is essential . . . to understand contemporary education."

French, German, and Latin. The larger schools offered a greater variety of courses, with relative enrollments in the languages in the larger schools exceeding those in the smaller schools by ratios of two and three to one. Further, retention rates in subsequent years within the languages were much higher in the larger schools. Finally, over 15,000 students attended schools that were not offering a foreign language.

- Interdisciplinary subjects were offered in less than ten percent of the high schools, and the schools offering these subjects were usually larger schools.

- Enrollments in music were appreciably greater in small schools, in some instances by a ratio of as much as two to one, even though the music offerings in the larger schools tripled that of the smaller schools.

- Industrial arts offerings and enrollments were appreciably increased in schools enrolling more than 200 students.

- Relative enrollments in the areas of physical education, social studies, mathematics, sciences, and art remained uniform regardless of school size.

Female-Male Enrollments

Some subject areas had higher enrollments by students of one sex:

- Female enrollment exceeded male enrollment by 25 percent or more in art (+25 percent), business (+91 percent), foreign languages (+47 percent), home economics (+37 percent), and music (+50 percent).

- Male enrollment exceeded female enrollment by 25 percent or more in agriculture (+81 percent) and industrial arts (+91 percent). Males exceeded females by approximately ten percent in mathematics (+10 percent) and natural sciences (+8 percent).

Observations

As we reviewed the survey results, we were struck by the proliferation of course titles. The existence of more than 2,000 titles makes it difficult to determine commonalities in content, purpose, and expectation of instruction (often termed general education, or common learnings) at both local and state levels. This pattern, referred to by Cawelti (1974) as the "patchwork curriculum," is particularly evident in social studies and English. Of 324 course titles reported in English language arts, most were in the area of literature. Reviewing them, Freeman (1979) commented that the array of courses seemed to be based more on the specific circumstances of local schools than on any conception of English as a subject. In response to this trend an increasing number of educators are convinced there should be a common core of

knowledge and skills that high school students should be expected to learn.

Another concern was the narrowness of offerings and limited enrollments in foreign languages, particularly in the smaller high schools. With the increasing need for improved international communications and understanding, it would seem that enrollments in foreign languages should be higher.

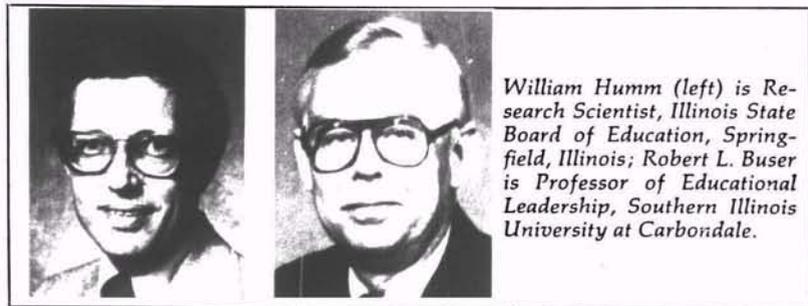
A third observation is related to the practice of scheduling most courses for the full school year. With the typical schedule crowded by graduation requirements, students are often prevented from taking special interest courses which could be scheduled if elective courses were for shorter blocks of time.

Finally, we note that the majority of offerings and enrollments are in the nonacademic areas of the curriculum. If a similar pattern exists in other states—and we assume it does—we need look no further for an explanation of the national decline in academic achievement at the high school level. *ET*

References

Cawelti, Gordon. *Vitalizing the High School*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1974.

Freeman, Lawrence. "The Future for English Curricula in Illinois Schools," *Special Report on English Language Arts*. Illinois State Board of Education, 1979.



William Humm (left) is Research Scientist, Illinois State Board of Education, Springfield, Illinois; Robert L. Buser is Professor of Educational Leadership, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.