

Isaac Wirszup is an unlikely enemy. When I first heard about his campaign to publicize the superiority of Soviet education in science and mathematics, I thought Wirszup might be a smug intellectual, but when I visited him at the University of Chicago, I found a charming, rosy-cheeked gentleman whose accent and gracious manners reveal his European upbringing. For 25 years he has tracked Soviet mathematics education, analyzing textbooks, courses of study, and examinations, and subscribing to periodicals intended for teachers and students. He keeps the materials stacked in his office where he urges visitors to see for themselves what Soviet schools are teaching.

Wirszup begins many of his sentences with "Please." His aim is not to embarrass American educators but to inform us about what he considers an alarming discrepancy between our math and science curriculums and those of other leading nations.

Our instinctive reaction is to defend ourselves. Many of us remember the response to Sputnik in the late 1950s. Because Ivan knew more than Johnny, we got the National Defense Education Act and eventually the curriculum reform movement. Recent studies by the National Science Foundation confirmed what school people have painfully learned: that all the effort produced some changes but not nearly enough. We don't want another round of that. And with scarce dollars and a doubting public, we don't welcome more evidence of our alleged inadequacies.

Wirszup isn't trying to discredit educators. Nor does he think we should mimic the Russians; he recognizes that our values and traditions are different. He doesn't even prescribe a solution, although he has plenty of ideas on that score. He believes his role is mainly to sound the alert.

Of course, he could be wrong. In this issue a professor and a curriculum administrator question whether Soviet education is so rousing suc-

cessful as Wirszup believes. An excerpt from a National Science Foundation report to the President is equally cautious. But all agree that U.S. science and mathematics education is weak—especially for the majority of students who are not college-bound.

Much as we might like to, we cannot avoid the excruciatingly difficult question of what education is basic for life in the 21st century. Some of our critics profess the simplistic notion that schools should be concerned only with so-called basic skills, but when others argue for "basics," they are closer to what educators are calling the "Essentials of Education," which include technological literacy.

Even more difficult than deciding what changes are needed is coming up with a strategy for achieving them. One of the reasons the sophisticated curriculums of the 60s weren't used more widely is that we lacked a way to make national curriculum decisions.

In the U.S.S.R. and most other countries, a new physics course is developed with the assistance of leading scholars, teachers are trained to teach it, tests devised to reflect it, and other necessary adaptations made in an orderly way. We don't want and probably won't have a national curriculum, but we badly need a better way to coordinate curriculum improvement.

What school district will undertake wholesale revision of its science and math programs if suitable textbooks aren't available? What publisher will market a new textbook series if it doesn't conform to what most districts teach? And why should test makers test for anything other than what is generally taught?

If we seriously propose to make sweeping curriculum changes, we have some tough issues to consider.

**Editor's note:** Readers' comments on our articles are welcome. Address letters to Editor, *Educational Leadership*, 225 No. Washington St., Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Letters accepted for publication may be edited for brevity and clarity.

## ASCD Upcoming Events

**Feb. 9-10, 1981:** NCSIs, "Leadership Styles," Birmingham; "Teaching Strategies," Anaheim; **Feb. 11-12:** NCSI, "Leadership Styles," Atlanta; **Mar. 5-6, 1981:** NCSIs, "Coping with Stress by Managing Your Time," "School Climate," "Clinical Supervision: Improving Supervisory Skills of Practitioners," and "Developing and Implementing Middle Schools," St. Louis; **Mar. 27-28, 1981:** NCSI "Leadership Styles," Washington, D. C.; **April 6-7, 1981:** NCSI, "Teacher Evaluation," New York; **April 9-10, 1981:** NCSI, "Teacher Evaluation," Chicago; Nebraska ASCD, Columbus; **April 10-11, 1981:** NCSI, "Public Confidence," Nashville; **April 30-May 1, 1981:** Ohio ASCD, Columbus; **May 1-2, 1981:** NCSI, "Discipline," San Francisco; **May 3-5, 1981:** New York ASCD, Kiamesha Lake; **May 11-12, 1981:** "Gifted/Talented," Reno. **May 14-15, 1981:** "Effective Instruction," Atlantic City; **May 14-16, 1981:** Affiliated Unit Presidents' Conference, Omaha; **May 18-19, 1981:** NCSI, "Staff Development," New Orleans; **June 5-6, 1981:** NCSI, "Leadership Styles," Portland; **June 11-12, 1981:** NCSI, "Curriculum Evaluation," Colorado Springs; **June 15-16, 1981:** NCSI, "Middle Schools," Seattle; **June 25-27, 1981:** ASCD Executive Council, Alexandria; **June 29, June 30, 1981:** NCSIs, "Learning/Teaching Styles," "Leadership Styles," "Supervision," "Gifted/Talented," "Middle Schools," "Classroom Management," Norfolk/Virginia Beach; **July 9-10, 1981:** NCSI, "Multicultural Education," New York; **July 20-23, 1981:** NCSI, "Leader Behavior," Hilton Head; **July 27-30, 1981:** NCSI, "Curriculum Development," San Francisco; **August 3-6, 1981:** NCSI, "Instructional Improvement," Boston; **August 10-11, 1981:** NCSI, "Staff Development," Cincinnati. **"Learning: Realities and Vision,"** ASCD's 36th Annual Conference and Exhibit Show, **Mar. 7-10, 1981,** St. Louis, Missouri, Cervantes Convention and Exhibition Center. Annual Conference Pre-registration closes **Feb. 2, 1981.**

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