

Large Scale Curriculum Development Is Out

Guest Editorial

E. JOSEPH SCHNEIDER

If there's one thing I dread, it's another Sputnik. That's all it would take to rekindle the patriotic spirit of the curriculum developers. And off they'd go, organizing yet another raid on the U.S. Treasury to fund their scientific inquiry and textbook revisions. No thanks! I've lived through one such revolution.

Now, I don't want to be misinterpreted. Public education owes a debt to the zealous curriculum developers who dropped what they were doing in the early 1960s and volunteered to help Johnnie regain his rightful place ahead of Ivan. But having extended that prerequisite professional courtesy, I quickly go on to state that large scale curriculum development is an idea whose time has passed.

My sentiments, I hasten to add, have little to do with the current anti-entirety fervor sweeping Washington. That is, I'm not against large-scale curriculum development simply because it's an expensive enterprise. Nor am I in agreement, let alone cahoots, with the conservative movement. I almost never break into hysterics when somebody suggests the curriculum might be attempting to help children think for themselves. Why, I may be the last vocal advocate of MACOS.

No, I stopped being a fan of federally-sponsored curriculum development for one simple reason: we've gone beyond this rather straightforward approach to school improvement.

The Bubble Burst

Like so many others, I came into this business during the heyday of large scale curriculum development. I never did any, but I certainly wrote a dozen or so glowing articles about those who did. And I believed right along with them that their materials were going to do wonderful things for

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education. When they didn't, I helped identify culprits. I blamed the teachers, sure. But not nearly as much as I blamed the teacher-training institutions. I certainly found fault with the commercial publishers. Why, they seemed perfectly happy to reject any new curriculum that couldn't be slapped between hard covers. And I heaped scorn and ridicule on those program evaluators paid by the federal government. I figured if their instruments couldn't show achievement gains from children's use of the new materials, then the evaluator had a problem, not the curriculum developer. I really believed that. In fact, I still do. But I've also learned that fretting about for villains blurs my vision, prevents my seeing what's really occurring in this profession of ours.

Because I was so busy defending large scale curriculum development, I nearly missed one of the most significant acts in this drama. That occurred when the federal government pulled its purse strings and quit underwriting the enterprise. Today, curriculum development—certainly at the scale prominent in the mid-60s—is nonexistent.

The Federal Thumb in Other Pies

After the government pulled out of the curriculum development business, it began investing heavily in dissemination. Not dissemination of its previously developed curriculum materials though. No, the government began a major program to disseminate research reports and something called "craft knowledge." As far as I can tell, "craft knowledge" is what educators employ when the correct answers elude them.

Many of the old curriculum development outfits now receive federal dollars to communicate such information to state department of education personnel. They, in turn, receive federal bucks to listen to the federally-funded disseminators. Together they sponsor "outreach" workshops and invite local school administrators and teachers to attend. In other words,

they're back doing in gung-ho fashion what people in this business used to do before they caught on that it didn't work and thus began doing curriculum development.

But that doesn't argue for a return to curriculum development heydays. It does argue for a reasonable approach to school improvement. An approach that capitalizes on what the curriculum developers learned while ignoring the popular but fruitless pitfalls favored by dissemination.

A Whole New Pie

We need to recognize that large-scale curriculum development as an enterprise wasn't as wrong as it was insufficient. Gathering a group of scholars together to agree on course content, to write texts and teacher materials, to pilot-test the material made good sense. But the companion activities needed to make curriculum development successful were missing. Several of my associates call this integrated set of activities "programmatically R & D." They're talking about curriculum development, sure. But they also mean finding better ways of assessing instructional outcomes, developing better ways of training teachers to use the new products, and improving ways of implementing the products in the complex administrative units known as schools.

Many of these same colleagues now tell me they know how to do these things. They can develop the indicators, for example, to determine whether or not the curriculum is being taught. And if it isn't, they know how to identify the problem and correct it. Also important, they know how to work with school personnel.

More and more of the major research and development outfits are proving to themselves that teachers and administrators can make an active, intelligent contribution to the development of curriculum materials. In fact, I don't know of any viable research and development institution that would attempt to develop classroom materials without the active

(Continued on page 596)

Letters

ACCOUNTABILITY OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Albert Shanker [November 1980] says federal monies are going to "community based organizations that keep no records, report no progress, and are accountable only to themselves." This generalization does not reflect community programs such as the one I work with.

A community program tends to be a supplier of services that support the priorities of a school system. Legislation places the power to decide the need for and desirability of the support with the school system. We are accountable to funding sources and their administrative and political agencies, students, parents, the corporation's board of directors, and the faculties and administrators we work with for the quantity and quality of service.

The methods used to measure success and lack of success are thoroughly quantifiable and documented. Student and program progress are reported regularly and frequently. In the case of our organization, progress is formally reviewed monthly.

Obviously, Mr. Shanker and I disagree as to the importance and effect of community organizations supporting a school system. As with any group or representative body there are ineffective and uncontrolled programs in operation. However, there are many community based programs that are effective, valued, and accountable.

—KENNETH ROMINES
Director
Mission Reading Clinic
San Francisco, California

BASIC SKILLS TESTING

There seems to be a cloud of dust obscuring some pertinent facts about testing in New Jersey [December 1980].

Shine and Goldman do not mention that the skills tested were basic skills appropriate to the specific grade levels identified by educators from all districts in New Jersey.

Their comment that there is a difference between skills learned in isolation

and the ability to use this knowledge in another situation cannot be refuted; without application, rote learning falls into disuse. But a testing situation is a sampling of transfer.

As a parent and educator I see student mastery of these skills as the minimum expected. These tests sample a subset of what students can be expected to know. There is no reason our children should not do well on them.

—ELIZABETH DODD
Administrative Assistant
Dunellen Board of Education
Dunellen, New Jersey

I read with interest "Governance by Testing in New Jersey" by Shine and Goldman and the response by New Jersey Commissioner Fred G. Burke [December 1980]. Since the advent in 1975 of the New Jersey system of "thorough and efficient" education, decision making has become more centralized every year. Whenever any school system, especially an urban system, has demonstrated a need or deficiency, that has become an excuse for issuing a statewide directive for all school systems. The "T & E" legislation has provided state officials with the opportunity to consolidate their authority over public education and to assert jurisdiction in almost any area.

Numerous state rules and regulations have been promulgated to control the most minute details of school operation. State mandated programs have proliferated with a doubling of cost within the past five years. Total school budgets have been "capped" with the result that state required programs occupy an ever increasing percentage of the local school budgets. These state minimum requirements are directed primarily toward those students who rank academically among the lowest third of the student population. Despite all of this state control and intervention, there has been very little change in student achievement over the five-year period.

The elaborate New Jersey system of political and bureaucratic governance of local public schools has proven to be costly, cumbersome, restrictive, and inefficient. It is not a good model for other states to emulate.

—GEORGE H. DANIEL
Superintendent of Schools
Bound Brook, New Jersey

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Schneider
(Continued from page 595)

involvement—throughout the process—of teachers and administrators.

What schools need, and have sought for years, are practical, validated instructional products and processes. One sure way for a school district to get them is by teaming up with research and development institutions and generating the improvement together.

Large scale curriculum development, like Sputnik itself, is an idea whose time has come and gone. But it has spawned a legacy, programmatic R & D. Now the R & D institutions and the schools must begin to demonstrate the payoff to the nation's school children. ■

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