A Study to Analyze Curriculum Decision Making in School Districts

Most curriculum decisions are made by building principals with quite a bit of input from teachers; parents and students, however, are generally left out.

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In American education there is no clear understanding or agreement concerning the curriculum decision-making responsibilities of the board of education, the superintendent, the central office staff, the principal, teachers, community members, or students. On the one hand, the accountability movement, with attendant state legislation, requires or implies strong centralized districtwide decision making. On the other hand, decentralization of curriculum development, which would increase decision-making responsibilities for teachers and principals, is promoted by teachers' professional associations and is supported by a considerable body of literature from organizational theory.

Review of Related Literature

In an attempt to shed some light on these issues, we first reviewed literature regarding curriculum policy matters pertaining to where decisions are made and who makes them.

Myers (1970) is one of several writers who contend that teacher participation in curriculum decision making has desirable consequences. Although it is widely thought that participation in planning and decision making by those who will implement new programs is an effective strategy and of paramount importance, the research findings are inconclusive (Giacquinta, 1973). For instance, Berman and Pauly (1975) report that participation in day-to-day decisions is important for effective implementation. Similarly, Duet (1972) found that teachers' use of curriculum guides was related to participation in curriculum development activities.

According to Young (1979), however, the teachers are not interested in participating in curriculum decision making. Olson and Kitto (1977) found that teachers give lip service to the importance of curriculum development but devote little time to it. Still other research found that teachers are oriented toward instruction, not curriculum (Morrison and others, 1977), and toward short-run planning (Lortie, 1975). Also, according to Young (1979), teachers are far more interested in how to teach than in what to teach; curriculum concerns are not an important part of teachers' lives as they function on a day-to-day basis in classrooms. Phillips and Hawthorne (1978) found that teachers, individually or collectively, tend to advise or deliberate, but rarely make curriculum *decisions*.

The extent to which teachers *as individuals* control the curriculum is discussed with considerable candor by English (1979), who claims teachers in fact decide what, how much, and when to teach. Yet, in a study reported by Alutto and Belasco (1972), individual teachers preferred a larger role in decision making than they actually had. Finally, Kirst and Walker (1971) point out that

teachers decide how to teach but that their influence rarely extends to curriculum decisions.

In an extensive review relating to curriculum implementation, Fullan and Pomfret (1977) reported that research has grossly neglected the role of students and parents as decision makers. According to the findings of Phillips and Hawthorne (1978), students are not involved at all. Parents, individually or collectively, are rarely involved in curriculum decisions, and when involved serve in an advisory capacity only.

The Problem

The literature points to the need to identify the major curriculum coordination and development processes and the contexts in which they occur. Only then will it be possible to probe more deeply into the quality of decisions, their effect on curriculum workers, and the quality of curriculum products. Until we have an effective means for determining *who does* participate, the question of *who should* will be extremely difficult to answer.

Thus, the primary focus of our study was the development and administration of an instrument—the Curriculum

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Figure 1. School District Enrollment Categories With Total Numbers, Sample Size, and Number of Responses.

District Student Enrollment	Total Number of Districts	Number Sampled	Number of Responses
350 or fewer	75	19	6
351–500	68	17	11
501–750	67	17	8
751–1000	53	13	8
1001–1500	57	14	6
1501–2500	46	12	9
2501–5000	37	9	5
5001–10,000	19	5	2
more than 10,000	13	4	2
Totals:	435	110	57

Figure 2. Total Group Rank of Curriculum Processes.

CURRICULUM PROCESSES	ADVISES										DELIBERATES									
	Board	Superintendent	Curric. Committee	Curric. Director	Principal	Total Faculty	Individual Teachers	Parents	Community	Students	Board	Superintendent	Curric. Committee	Curric. Director	Principal	Total Faculty	Individual Teachers	Parents	Community	Students
1. Determining budget requirements for curriculum		2			1		3					2			1		3			
2. Determining curriculum areas in need of revision/improvement			3		1		2					2			1		3			
3. Determining who will participate in curriculum planning					1	2	3								1	2	3			
4. Formulating school district philosophy		3			1				2			2			1				3	
5. Determining priority of school district goals		3			1				2			2			1				3	
6. Formulating school district philosophy	2				1				3			2			1				3	
7. Developing/selecting goals of subject matter					2	3	1					3			1		2			
8. Formulating a rationale for subject matters			3		1		2					3			1		2			
9. Developing/selecting terminal objectives			3		1.5		1.5					3			1		2			
10. Specifying the sequence for terminal objectives			3		1		2					3			1		2			
11. Selecting content			3		2		1					3			1		2			
12. Determining the sequence for content taught			3		2		1					3			2		1			
13. Allocating objectives to content			3		2		1					3			1		2			
14. Selecting textbooks/resources			3		2		1					3			1		2			
15. Determining minimum level of competence required by students			3		1		2					3			1		2			

*1, 2, and 3 represent the three most dominant individuals involved in the process—1 representing the most dominant and 3 the least dominant.

Decision-Making Inventory—for analyzing key elements of a school district's curriculum development system: (1) the participants in the curriculum development processes, (2) the decisions they are involved in, and (3) the roles participants play.

Setting and Procedures Used in the Study

We categorized all school districts in Minnesota according to student enrollment and drew a random sample from each of nine student enrollment groups. Then we contacted 110 school districts, asking them to complete the Curriculum Decision-Making Inventory. Fifty-seven usable responses were returned for a response rate of 52 percent (Figure 1).

The instruments were mailed to su-perintendents asking them to identify roles of groups involved in four different capacities (advises, deliberates, decides, approves) for each of 15 curriculum processes. A facsimile of the instrument appears as Figure 2.

The curriculum coordination and development items included on the instrument resulted initially from a search of curriculum literature and finally from a review by graduate students and colleagues. We paid careful attention to ensure that the final 15 items differentiated sharply between curriculum processes and instructional processes. We included items that focused on decisions that affect or directly specify what will be taught, to whom, and in what order or sequence. We excluded items that addressed decisions that affect or specify how something is to be taught.

Survey Results

Each of the 15 items had 40 possible tallies because there were four types of involvement (advises, deliberates, decides, approves) and ten possible groups who could have been involved in each of the areas. Any given question—such as, "Does the school board advise?"— had a possible tally of 57, one tally for each of the 57 districts participating in the study. To draw conclusions, the highest three tallies across groups were considered and ranked 1–3 in order to identify the dominant groups in that process.

The survey results, which were examined item by item, answer the question of who is involved and in what capacity.

CURRICULUM PROCESSES	DECIDES											APPROVES									
	Board	Superintendent	Curric. Committee	Curric. Director	Principal	Total Faculty	Individual Teachers	Parents	Community	Students		Board	Superintendent	Curric. Committee	Curric. Director	Principal	Total Faculty	Individual Teachers	Parents	Community	Students
1. Determining budget requirements for curriculum	3	1			2							1	2								
2. Determining curriculum areas in need of revision/improvement		2			1							1	2								
3. Determining who will participate in curriculum planning		2			1							1	2								
4. Formulating school district philosophy	3	1			2							1	2								
5. Determining priority of school district goals	3	1			2							1	2								
6. Formulating school district philosophy	1.5	1.5										1									
7. Developing/selecting goals of subject matter		3			1		2					1	2								
8. Formulating a rationale for subject matters		2			1		3					1	2			3					
9. Developing/selecting terminal objectives		3			1		2					2	3			1					
10. Specifying the sequence for terminal objectives		3			1		2					2	3			1					
11. Selecting content		3			1		2					2	3			1					
12. Determining the sequence for content taught		3			1		2					2	3			1					
13. Allocating objectives to content		3			1		2					2	3			1					
14. Selecting textbooks/resources		3			1		2					3	1			2					
15. Determining minimum level of competence required by students		3			1		2					3	1.5			1.5					

Item 1, "determining budget requirements," has a consistent pattern in regard to who *advises* and who *deliberates*; the principal is the dominant person in this role, followed by the superintendent, and third, the individual teacher. In the *decision* category the order from highest to lowest is superintendent, principal, and then school board.

For item 2, "determining curriculum areas needing revision or improvement," in the capacity of *advisor*, the principal ranked first, followed by individual teachers, and the curriculum committee last. In the *deliberation* role the principal again ranked highest, the curriculum committee second, and then the individual teacher. The principal ranked first on who *decides*, followed by the superintendent.

Item 3, "determining who participates," has the same pattern for *advising* and *deliberating* with the principal ranked highest, then total faculty, and last the individual faculty. *Decisions* again find the highest rank being the principal, then the superintendent.

Items 4, 5, and 6 follow almost identical patterns. For *advising*, the principal, community representatives, and the superintendent; for *deliberating*, the principal, the superintendent, and community representatives were the three groups most involved; and for *deciding*, the superintendent, then the principal, and last the school board. Items 7–15, which emphasize curriculum development processes, have virtually the same patterns; for *advising* it is usually the individual teacher, then building prin-

cipal, followed by the curriculum committee. For *deliberating* and *deciding* the patterns are the same, the principal ranked highest, then the individual teacher, then the curriculum committee.

In determining who serves in the capacity of *approving* the various curriculum processes, these items form just two patterns. For curriculum processes 1–8 the school board plays the most prominent role, with the superintendent second. With the exception of item 14, the remaining indicate the shift in approval from the district office to the building principal.

To the question, "Who are the participants in a school district's curriculum development processes?", the results would suggest the following: three

groups do all the *advising, deliberating,* and *deciding* for items 7–15. These are the principal, individual faculty members, and curriculum committees, with the principal usually most heavily involved across all 15 items. For the first six items, a measure of curriculum coordination, there is some strong participation by superintendents and community representatives, in addition to the three just mentioned.

The survey results were also examined to identify patterns within the *decision area* to determine the locus of decision making within a school system (Figure 3). Common patterns existed on items 7 through 15, as measures of curriculum development. In general, the individual teacher makes the decisions, suggesting a classroom decision. Another pattern indicates that the principal, or principal and total faculty, or individual teachers assume responsibility for the curriculum development processes, which suggests a school decision. The last set of common patterns had the curriculum committee and/or director involved in the decision process, suggesting a district-level decision. Figure 3 presents these three categories in relationship to student enrollment.

The data in Figure 3 show that the classroom is the main locus of decisions relating to curriculum development in eight of the 57 school districts studied. In 24 districts decisions about curriculum development are made at the school building level, and in 25 districts these decisions are made at the district level. The locus of decision making bears a general relationship to school district enrollment, with the classroom being the dominant locus of decision making in small districts. The school building predominates as the locus of decision making in the small- and medium-sized districts, with districtwide decisions most prevalent in districts with medium and large student enrollments.

Implications of the Study

We made no attempt in this study to find an answer to the question of *who should* participate in advising, deliberating, deciding, and approving curriculum processes. Our focus, rather, was on *who does* participate. We were not surprised to find, for example, that teachers are extensively involved in curriculum development, but much less so

Figure 3. Locus of Curriculum Decision Making by School District Enrollment.

Student Enrollment	Locus of Decision Making		
	Classroom	School	School District
350 or fewer	1	5	
351–500	3	6	2
501–750	3	3	2
751–1000	1	3	4
1001–1500		2	4
1500–2500		5	4
2501–5000			5
5001–10,000			2
More than 10,000			2
Totals	8	24	25

in curriculum coordination processes. With the exception of their involvement in advising and deliberating about a district's philosophy and goals, community members were almost totally excluded from curriculum coordination and development processes. Students were, in fact, excluded. The most surprising finding was the unusually heavy involvement of the building principal in advising, deliberating, and deciding in the various curriculum coordination *and* development processes.

The study seems to point to several questions that need to be raised in individual school districts, as well as in institutions that prepare teachers and principals. Are teachers prepared for the involvement in curriculum development expected of them? Are principals capable of carrying out the curriculum responsibilities that this study indicates they have, given the nature of their preparation and the time demands of the position? Do school districts really want community members and students to be excluded from curriculum processes to the extent indicated in this study? Perhaps before these questions can be answered, school districts will have to carefully investigate who participates, and in what capacity, in their curriculum decisions. **EL**

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