WE TRIED THAT BUT...

Legend is that teachers opposed to change always say, "We tried that but it didn't work." That is the current policy on national curriculum development.

After a flurry of activity in the 1960s and '70s, the governing body of the National Institute of Education banned further use of federal funds for the preparation and testing of instructional materials. Even the regional laboratories, created to help translate professional knowledge into classroom practice, were forbidden to design and test instructional programs except under unrealistic conditions. The National Science Foundation, although it has no firm policy on the matter, has not in fact funded major curriculum projects for several years. Recently announcements from NSF that it will fund "materials development" in science and social science suggest that a change is already under way there.

The last round of federal curriculum development was stimulated by recognition of the need for better science and mathematics education, part of America's reaction to Sputnik. As James Rutherford (p. 25) comments, "For a few years, we probably had the best science education the country had ever had, but we didn't keep the process up." Now American schools are again being compared unfavorably with those of other nations. The need for better science and mathematics programs is again apparent. Improvement will require changing much more than curriculum and teaching materials, but curriculum is the foundation for all else.

Rutherford and other leading science educators (Robert Yager, p. 12, and Paul Hurd, p. 20) envision a new approach that helps students understand technological applications and related social issues. While a few exemplary programs already exist, they do not go as far as the experts think they should. For example, most are offered only to less successful students rather than as general education for all.

The formula under which a new generation of curricula might be produced is familiar: distinguished scholars work with curriculum experts, specialists in learning and instructional technology, creative artists, and talented teachers who know classroom conditions and the kinds of children being planned for.

With their varying backgrounds, such people seldom agree quickly on content or design, but eventually the combination of scholarship, practicality, and imagination may produce exciting ideas. Even so, the curriculum is not ready for wider use until it has been tested and revised repeatedly.

All this takes a long time and a lot of money. Is it worth it? Suppose a curriculum costs $10 million and is taught over a five-year period to ten million children. A dollar per pupil is hardly exorbitant to ensure that the much higher amounts spent for teachers' salaries and other purposes are well used.

Three of the arguments commonly offered against federal sponsorship are that it can and should be done by commercial publishers, that curriculum should be planned at the local level, and that programs like Man: The Course to Study trampled on family values and taught secular humanism. Few commercial publishers can afford to invest millions of dollars in developing and testing materials before marketing them. With proper safeguards, materials developed with federal funds can be turned over to profit-making publishers for distribution. Products of the major publishers already constitute a kind of national curriculum, but even if the federal government should push only one program in each subject area which was not the pattern in the 60s, there is little danger of monolithic federal control so long as decision making is left in the hands of local districts.

The issue of family values is not easily resolved, except to point out that powerful programs in applied science and social studies necessarily raise important value questions. Whether a particular curriculum treats such issues appropriately is a matter for local discretion, although a system of professional peer review may help prevent excesses.

When the current policy was formulated six years ago, American education had barely begun learning how to do large-scale curriculum development. The early products were not perfect, but with improved evaluation and feedback they could have been strengthened—and the next generation would have been stronger still. A major factor in the quality of education in Japan, Israel, the Soviet Union, and other countries is the existence of curriculum development centers charged with preparation and testing of instructional materials.

We should try it again. Under the right conditions, it can work even better.