

It's Time to Abolish Conventional Curriculum Guides

In more and more states, textbooks drive what is taught in the classroom, but statewide examinations test it. Only curriculum that matches the tests will bring district accountability and student success.

It may be heresy to say it, but curriculum guides are obsolete. After reading, rating, and ranking hundreds of such guides in seven states since 1979 as a part of curriculum audits,¹ I find that most of them are neither used, usable, nor reliable indicators of what teachers really do in their classrooms when the doors are shut.²

I've conducted several random and anonymous surveys³ in which teachers have told me that they use two things to make day-to-day content decisions about curriculum: their own ideas and the textbook.

Because so many school officials are jumping on the bandwagon to respond to state initiatives, the development of curriculum guides is again the subject of budgetary battles. It's a shame that the money spent on most guides is a complete waste.

Why Curriculum Guides Are a Waste

At least five reasons, from the practical to the philosophical and economic, confirm that curriculum guides are a wasteful expenditure of educational resources.

1. *Most guides are not user friendly.* Ask most teachers what the term *curriculum guide* conjures up in their minds, and they will describe a red or blue three-ring binder that weighs about as much as the Manhattan telephone book. Normally, there is inadequate cross-referencing by objective, grade level, and subject matter and little information about testing or eval-

uation. What consumes most guides are pages of ideas about methods or activities. Rather than use these guides, teachers confess in confidential interviews that they derive course content from the textbooks they use, copying many of their activities almost directly from the textbooks. The formidable bulk of most guides easily discourages their practical use in classroom settings; textbooks, in contrast, are smaller and closer to daily instructional decisions that teachers make.

2. *Most guides are not quality documents.* Too often district curriculum administrators assume that anyone with a teaching certificate can write a curriculum guide. After plowing through several different guides produced in the same district, I'm amazed at their unpredictable articulation of subject area content. The reason is that few school systems have established specifications for curriculum development. Fewer still train teachers in curriculum writing. Successful classroom teaching and cogent writing skills are not synonymous. Usable curriculum guides aren't developed by accident. They are produced after school systems establish a sound plan and set of specifications to which they are the desired product.

The lack of quality in most curriculum documents is reflected in the standard answer to the question, "How do you know if these are any good?" Typically, the response is "Well, a lot of people were involved in this." An equally common response is

"Other districts write us for copies of our guides." Neither answer has anything to do with curriculum quality or with the use of pupil outcomes to measure whether the curriculum is successful.

3. *Most guides are based on a partially true premise.* The current ideology is that to guarantee that curriculum will be used, teachers must write it. The source of this belief comes from writing in the '60s and '70s about "involvement."⁴ Taken to an extreme form it represents the "bubble-up" approach to curriculum development, which means that teachers must actually create the curriculum they will use. If they don't own it, they won't use it.

Yet there are obvious data in almost every school system that contradict this premise. The most common form of the curriculum is the textbook.⁵ It has even been called the "curriculum surrogate."⁶

How many teachers in any given school district actually wrote the textbooks they use? Does their "lack of involvement" mean that they are less passionately devoted to some books than others? From teachers' comments in audit interviews, I've discovered that even those who write curriculum guides don't use them. How does this square with the "bubble-up" ideology? It doesn't. The matter of adopting anything in a classroom is more complex than this. Perhaps one clue is that teachers are most likely to use the materials they consider to be helpful to them *in their setting*, whether they actually wrote them or not.

4. *Most guides are too costly and take too much time to create.* Curriculum development in most places is a very laborious process. It is time-consuming and expensive. Sometimes it takes so long that the curriculum may be obsolete before it can be published.

Despite the fact that most curriculum directors know curriculum can't be written at the end of the teaching day, we still ask tired teachers to write it. We seem to be so desperate for curriculum that we accept almost anything teachers can produce.

Few school districts have working curriculum documents for all K-12 areas. I know of no district that has developed documents that illustrate

the "lateral curriculum"—all of the skills and disciplines involved with teaching, for example, the fourth grade. Most curriculum is cast vertically, K-12.

While it may be philosophically stimulating to think about curriculum development as a "never-ending process," that prospect tends to discourage school board support for developing curriculums because the board can never see any light at the end of the tunnel.

When we say to teachers that "the curriculum is never done," we undermine the chance that the curriculum will be in place long enough to be applied in classrooms. Teachers know if they wait long enough, the existing curriculum will be replaced by another version. They have little faith in it because they know it won't last.

Curriculum development must be scaled down. The process must become shorter and more compact. The product must become smaller and more usable.

5. *Most guides are based on the myth of local control.* Much of the existing curriculum literature is rooted firmly in the idea that there should be an orderly process of moving from community needs to local curriculum ob-

jectives. These objectives enter classrooms in the form of locally produced curriculum guides.

The process breaks down when the procedures used to identify local needs are flawed as a result of unreliable sampling and statistical procedures,⁷ and when goals are not broken down into measurable components to ascertain if they have been reached.⁸ The process is so flawed in most places that it is impossible to trace the translation of the "community will" into precise teaching objectives.

What can be identified are discrete activities performed in isolation from one another. For example, there might be a type of needs assessment.⁹ At the same time, there might be an "open forum" of community volunteers to think about the future. The school system also might develop a strategic planning committee. However, the day-to-day process of teaching, textbook adoption, test use, and assessment goes on largely uninfluenced by groups. At the operational level, schools do not feel the impact of these activities, and no connectors bind them into a cohesive process. My experience with on-site analysis of curriculum control persuades me that true local control of the curriculum as

it is idealized in the literature simply *does not work*.¹⁰

A More Promising Alternative

A more promising alternative to curriculum development responds to emerging conditions around the country, most notably to statewide testing. Many school districts struggling to accommodate to these tests have abandoned the traditional curriculum guide approach because it is too time-consuming. In contrast, an emerging emphasis on *curriculum alignment*¹¹ focuses on achieving congruence between the adopted textbooks (the curriculum surrogate) and the state test at two levels.

At the first level, administrators ascertain that the content of the test can be located within the textbooks in use. At the second level, context alignment ensures that the testing situation is replicated in the textbook as well. The development of specific teaching strategies compensates for any discrepancies. Thus, instruction (the taught curriculum) ensures that both content and context (the written curriculum) align to the maximum degree to the high school proficiency test (the tested curriculum). These major indices

Table 1
Sample Page from Curriculum Alignment Guide

Reference to Local Objective	Match to State Objective	State Test Item Illustrating Testing Context	Textbook Alignment	Adjustments in Taught Curriculum (Content/Context)
Mathematics— Compute the area of an irregular figure	#43—No formula given using combination of rectangles	<p>What is the area of this figure? (All angles are right angles.)</p> <p>A. 40 square inches B. 56 square inches C. 60 square inches D. 80 square inches</p>	<p>Grade Six Math Today (© 1980) (no reference to this skill)</p> <p>Grade Seven Practical Math (© 1978) pp. 83-97</p> <p>Grade Eight Math on Target (© 1984) pp. 61-65.</p>	<p>(Content-Context) Use district-developed supplementary paper #4, pp. 8-14</p> <p>(Context) Teachers should note that the example is for a square only and not multiples. Also, formula is provided.</p> <p>(Context) Same problem as with the seventh grade text except formula referenced in back of book.</p>

form the basis of curriculum quality control.¹²

After vertical (K-12) and lateral alignment has occurred using the adopted textbooks,¹³ a curriculum alignment guide is developed to serve as the basis for curriculum mapping. Mapping is a tool used to deal with delivery problems in the classroom. Mapping data provide a basis for making adjustments in content taught, time spent, level of repetition, and sequence.¹⁴

Advantages of Curriculum Alignment Guides

Curriculum alignment materials appear to have four major advantages over traditional curriculum guides.

• *Local control of the curriculum has a specific reference.* It is possible to identify the curriculum objectives that derive from local or state mandates or from some other source, such as textbooks or other references. Thereafter, it is possible to demonstrate the *match* among all of these objectives and to ascertain the percentage of the curriculum that is locally defined, distinct from state and national content.

This data base enables a school system to be precise when it says, "The state test [or some other test] only assesses approximately 45 percent of the district's curriculum." Without a data base the public often views such phrases as excuses for poor test performance.

• *Textbook adoptions can be driven by local objectives.* Without a concrete set of pupil objectives, a school district can never know if local control of the curriculum has been usurped by textbook adoption or test requisition. Because of the dominance of the textbook and the visibility of tests, control of the curriculum often passes to these sources by default. A set of validated local curriculum objectives ensures that the use of textbooks is driven by local priorities and not vice versa.

• *Pupil achievement is maximized.* When textbooks are aligned to existing tests and these, in turn, are cross-referenced to district objectives and placed into a workable format (see Table 1), the school district places in the classroom all of the data necessary for congruence among the written, taught, and tested curriculums. This

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enables a school to reduce the number of pupil failures prior to testing or to build the problem out of the system. Thus, the school focuses on the preventive use of test data rather than its remedial use after students have failed.

• *Curriculum monitoring is easier.* Curriculum monitoring is made much easier when alignment materials are present in classrooms. Principals, supervisors, and department and grade-level chairpersons can track the curriculum as it is being delivered. The cross-referencing allows supervisors to link lesson plans and classroom observations to local, state, or national priorities. The plan enhances the constructive use of feedback from test data.

Curriculum alignment guides not only indicate locally mandated curriculum content, they provide a framework for implementation at the three levels of the school district: classroom, school, and system. When employed K-12, these materials help manage and control the links between the separate units of a school district; they make curriculum articulation an approachable problem. The result is a school system instead of the usual system of schools. □

1. The actual rating criteria appear in John R. Hoyle, Fenwick W. English, and Betty E. Steffy, *Skills for Successful School Leaders* (Arlington, Va.: American Association of School Administrators, 1985), 91.

2. Fenwick W. English, "Curriculum

Mapping," *Educational Leadership* 37 (April 1980): 558-559.

3. See "Report on an Educational Performance Audit of the Bellflower Unified School District" (Los Angeles: Peat Marwick Mitchell & Co., 1981) and "Pemberton Township Public Schools: School Survey Report" (Fogelsville, Pa.: Fleischer Management Associates, Inc., 1985).

4. Perhaps the best single source is Matthew B. Miles, ed., *Innovation in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1964).

5. This is the most common form of curriculum planning. See George A. Beauchamp, "Curriculum Thinking," in *Fundamental Curriculum Decisions*, ed. F. W. English (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1983), 18-29.

6. See Fenwick W. English, "Getting the Most from the New Jersey HSPT: A Practical Guide to Resolving Curriculum Design and Delivery Problems" (Trenton: New Jersey State Department of Education, Division of General Academic Education, 1985).

7. See Roger A. Kaufman and Fenwick W. English, "Consensual Determining Techniques in Needs Assessment," in *Needs Assessment: Concept and Application* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications, 1979), 241-284.

8. Robert Larson, "Goal Setting in Planning: Myths and Realities" (paper presented to the 31st Annual National Conference of Professors of Educational Administration, Eugene, August 1977).

9. See Roger Kaufman, *Identifying and Solving Problems: A Systems Approach* (La Jolla, Calif.: University Associates, Inc., 1976).

10. The notion of using social inputs dates to Franklin Bobbitt. Perhaps the most common derivative, however, is Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

11. English, "Getting the Most from the New Jersey HSPT."

12. Fenwick W. English, *Quality Control in Curriculum Development* (Arlington, Va.: American Association of School Administrators, 1978).

13. Connie Muther, *Textbook Adoption: A Process for Decision Making* (Manchester, Conn.: Textbook Advisory Services, 1986).

14. Fenwick W. English and Betty E. Steffy, "Curriculum Mapping: An Aid to School Curriculum Management," *Spectrum* 1 (Fall 1983): 17-26.

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