Reshaping the High School Curriculum

To prepare students for tomorrow, Manchester (Connecticut) High School is rebuilding its curriculum around a set of competencies defined by teachers.

Long-range curriculum planning in American schools usually means preparing next year's budget. So it had been at Manchester (Connecticut) High School until we decided to begin planning for significant curriculum change. We have just completed the third year of a five-year effort to reshape the curriculum to prepare our students for the future.

As the 1983 National Teacher of the Year, I spent the 1983-84 school year traveling the United States as a public relations representative for teachers. Circumstantially, in April 1983, the same month that I was honored at the White House, A Nation at Risk was released. I spent my year responding to it and the subsequent spate of reports on the state of American education. To me, the reports suggested not that schools had deteriorated but that they were no longer meeting society's needs and would have to be changed dramatically if they were to meet tomorrow's needs. I warned school staff members to avoid the temptation of returning to the basics as a quick fix. Instead, I encouraged them to plan to move ahead with expanded basics.

During a brief return visit to my school, the principal good-naturedly chided me for helping schools all over the country to become involved in long-range planning for change while our school remained in a one-year-at-a-time mode. So, during my next cross-country flight, I outlined a plan for our school, which I presented to the principal and the vice-principal for program and instruction.

From that blueprint evolved our five-year planning process, which is based on the concepts of strategic planning. Our goals in using this process were to redefine the competencies our students would need to achieve success in the future and, subsequently, to reshape the curriculum and reorganize its delivery.

How Much of What Basics?
The reform reports emphasized what teachers already knew, that higher-level thinking skills must be part of public education when information is the raw material of society. This does...
not negate the importance of the three Rs, but we need to stop and ask ourselves just how much reading, how much writing, how much arithmetic, and how much of other competencies kids need today and how much will they need tomorrow? Will yesterday's basics, at the same level of mastery, serve us tomorrow? To begin our long-range planning, we asked our staff to answer that question.

**Year One: Competencies for Tomorrow**

During the first year, staff members reexamined the basics that our curriculum should deliver now for students to be successful in ten years. We scheduled a half-day staff development session during which we had randomly assigned the entire staff to work in groups of nine, mixing departments and grade-level teachers. Each group was to define the basic competencies using a consensus process.

As a starting point, we prepared a list of every competency found in *High School*, the report of the Carnegie Commission, which was prepared from an educational perspective, and in *Action for Excellence*, the often-overlooked report of the Education Commission of the States, which seemed to reflect the perspective of the world of work.

We then asked each group to project a list of basic competencies for tomorrow. Each group had a volunteer leader who had attended a planning session for this activity. The groups met after school for several weeks until the task was completed.

The groups submitted their reports to the Faculty Curriculum Committee to reconcile disagreements among reports and finalize the format. The committee consists of ten classroom teachers, with a limit of two department heads. As the guardian of the school curriculum, the committee has been empowered by the principal to oversee any proposals that might change the curriculum.

The curriculum committee spent an entire day and several afternoons preparing the final draft for presentation to the staff. The resulting 40 competencies were grouped under 6 categories: communication, logic, creative, cultural, personal, and reasoning.

So, at the end of the first year, we had consensus among 125 teachers as to what the basic competencies for a high school education should be. We carefully avoided categorizing the competencies into subject areas or including content references so that no competency would appear to be the bailiwick of any single department. We were concerned not with what information students should learn but with ensuring that they knew how to learn.
Year Two: What Are We Doing Right?

After a year of teacher discussing with teacher, we were ready to move ahead in our plan. To assure teachers that change didn't mean throwing out everything and replacing it with something totally new, we assessed what we were presently doing with our curriculum relative to what we needed to do.

Specifically, we asked our staff to compare their present teaching with the 40 competencies. At the end of the semester, the teachers completed a survey that asked two basic questions about each course each teacher taught:

1. Was the competency a primary focus of your instruction, a secondary focus, or not really a focus of instruction?
2. Was the competency a primary focus of student experience, a secondary focus, or not really a focus of student experience?

Once these data were compiled, the faculty curriculum committee analyzed the results. We found that some competencies were the primary focus of instruction and experience in most courses in our school. Such overlap could be appropriate, but some could be wasting everyone's time and even account for student boredom.

Other basic competencies were mastered only by students who had the opportunity to schedule certain elective courses. Furthermore, increased graduation requirements that were recently mandated would leave students less room in their schedules for electives.

We also discovered that some of our basic competencies were emphasized, if at all, in only a few courses. If they were truly basic, we had some gaps to fill.

Year Three: What Must Be Changed?

Next our plan called for the curriculum committee to identify what we would most need to change to guarantee that all students would experience and master the 40 competencies, especially in light of what we were presently doing. The committee agreed on four major shifts in focus to put a new or renewed emphasis on:

1. thinking (logical, critical, and creative),
2. global interdependence,
3. communication, and
4. continued pursuit of learning leading to self-realization.

These four areas became the foundation for a new school mission statement.

The committee then analyzed the existing curriculum, its organization, and its delivery in terms of what changes would be needed if we were to successfully accomplish our mission and specifically cover all 40 competencies. Again, consensus was required with the goal of narrowing our need list to a workable number of concerns. We identified five clear needs:

1. flexible scheduling for students and teachers,
plan a method for doing so. Anticipating and dealing with interferences will be a major consideration during the fifth year. Interferences can be grouped into three categories.

Cultural interference will be a major regard because our staff members are quite experienced and have traditions and habits that might well be questioned, even threatened, by significant change. Also, each strategy will require eliciting support from the school board, central administration, other district schools, and parents. Staff development and public relations will be vital in responding to such interference.

Economic interference is always a consideration in public education. Any strategy must respond to funding issues, particularly if strategies concentrate on materials. Reordering economic priorities will probably play a major role in alleviating economic interference.

Political interference could be significant. We will need to anticipate working through state laws, school policies, and negotiated contracts. The key to dealing with political interference may well be a careful analysis of just what documents constrain vs. what ones do not.

Once the strategies are plotted, we will return to the staff for their review and finally meet with the administration to select the strategies that we will begin to implement the following year.

But Will It Work?

There is no guarantee that the future will become what we have imagined. Our goal should be to establish a continuous and flexible planning process. If we undertake a strategy and run into unanticipated interference, we may have to shift paths, perhaps even back up a step or two. If we undertake a strategy and it simply does not work, we will admit that it does not work and shift to another strategy. But we will not change because of shock or panic that so often results in "band-aid surgery." We will be ready to shape change. We will have recaptured the future.

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Year Four:
The Process of Change

Now into our fourth year, we are planning strategies for reshaping the curriculum around our expanded basics.

The curriculum committee is considering a wide variety of methods for meeting our five needs. We might focus on any combination of the following: scheduling, departmentalization, methodologies, materials, course substitutions, teacher definition, graduation requirements, and course objectives. We will consider any method if it can be demonstrated that it will help to meet one or more of the five needs we identified in our third year.

Equipped with a list of possible methods, we can apply each one to all five needs in order to identify the positive or negative impact of each method on each need. Based on these methods, we will create our strategy paths, and the staff groups will evaluate and rank them for efficacy and desirability. We will then be ready to complete our planning process.

Year Five:
Planning the Change

At the beginning of year five we will plot our strategies, planning the step-by-step implementation of each one. We will think in terms of a five-year plan for each strategy in order to avoid the common mistake of trying to rush change.

We will need not only to identify the tasks to be accomplished but also to