

# The Curriculum Cup Runneth Over

When new programs arrive, what do we cut?

This year in New York State we have a new AIDS curriculum to teach. But if the instructional day is already overcrowded, then what should be omitted to allow time to teach about AIDS?

Schools are continually asked to do more and more in the same amount of time. Each year, elementary school teachers are given new state guidelines in at least one subject area.

But *when* do teachers add new topics? What should be shortened or withdrawn from the existing curriculum to make room for the new material? State education officials are quick to recommend new curriculums but reluctant to recommend how much time should be devoted to the teaching of curriculum components. They are also unwilling to indicate what should be removed from present instructional programs to allow time for the new program pieces.

Take the health curriculum, for example. In the past three years, our state education department has added a new "personal safety" component, enriched the existing "drug and alcohol abuse" component, revised the "physical education" component to tie in with the health curriculum, and added instruction on AIDS. Nowhere in all of these new documents are specific time guidelines for implementation.

Nor is this problem unique to New York State. Conversations with other principals at national conventions have convinced me that the curriculum is overcrowded in many other states as well. The elementary school curriculum cup runneth over, and no one at the state level appears to recognize either the magnitude of the runoff or the disillusionment of those who must mop up the spillover.

## Advice from the Experts

I have requested time guidelines for each subject area from many curricu-

lum experts in my state. Their responses helped explain why we have such a problem.

When asked how teachers can find time to teach new content areas, state education officials' typical response was "use an interdisciplinary approach." Granted, an interdisciplinary approach is often a fine way to treat subject matter. For example, we can ask children to read about and discuss fire safety, write about their discussion, and then illustrate their work, thereby weaving language arts, visual arts, and fire safety into the health curriculum. Unfortunately, it isn't always that easy. One high-ranking curriculum bureau official suggested we have children in the primary grades all read common material about a topic. However, reading matter on that topic does not exist for primary grades. Moreover, most schools use basal readers in their elementary grades; and no publisher prepares stories to match the alignment of all subject area requirements in our state.

Other responses were also out of touch with reality. Several state education officials suggested curriculum applications for the "typical 30-hour week" at the elementary school. There is no 30-hour week, however, in an instructional sense. Time must be subtracted for lunch and recess and for transitions between subject areas. In fact, homeroom teachers are lucky if they have a class to instruct for 20 of those 30 hours. And given the interruptions for schoolwide assemblies, given the number of children pulled out of class for special services, few teachers have their entire class to instruct for even 10 hours a week.

The answer one bureau chief gave repeatedly to my question—"That is a matter for you and your local school board to decide"—is not responsible. Although the state education department may designate a curriculum as

"only recommended" and "not required," the same group of officials mandates annual pupil and program evaluation tests based on that curriculum. These mandated tests place great pressure on teachers and administrators to teach the "recommended" curriculum so their children will score well compared to children in other schools and districts. To suggest that local practitioners have the option of deciding what syllabus to follow and what syllabus to reject is disingenuous.

## Recommendations

Each state education department bureau must ensure that a set of time guidelines accompanies each new curriculum or syllabus document issued. If those time guidelines call for an increase of content, they should also indicate what part of the present curriculum should receive decreased time. In addition, no department should ever issue a document without first conducting an impact survey to determine what effect teaching that syllabus will have on the rest of the school curriculum and the school day.

As an elementary school principal increasingly frustrated with state officials who refuse to face the realities of the classroom, I have promised my staff that I will no longer tolerate this practice of "adding on" to the curriculum without "making room." To use the time we have more efficiently is laudable; to do more than that is impossible. We cannot continue to pour new components into the curriculum cup without some present components spilling out; but with realistic planning, we can avoid overflow and keep the most important elements of the curriculum intact. □

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