Fred G. Thatcher

School Boards and Curriculum Decisions

THERE are two concepts of the meaning and application of the term curriculum as used in the public schools.

The narrow concept is that curriculum is limited to a subject, a course or a body of courses used in the school program. Under this concept, a curriculum decision is limited to the addition, deletion or change in a subject or course. European schools generally accept this concept.

In America a much broader concept of curriculum is generally held by professional educators. The broader concept, expressed in the simplest terms, is that curriculum embraces everything that is used by the schools in the education and training of the child. Some educators make a distinction between curriculum and those things included in the recreational program.

Because school board members generally are lay persons and generally are not technically trained in educational theory and procedures, their usual policy is to hold the administrator and professional staff responsible for curriculum studies and research and for counsel in making curriculum decisions. Professional educators have usually encouraged this policy. James B. Conant has expressed the thought that school boards should not make curriculum decisions except insofar as they affect the budget. While nearly all school board decisions affect the budget and, indirectly, the curriculum, school boards usually consider decisions such as providing classrooms, furniture and equipment, teaching materials, salaries of teachers, or utility services, as allocations against capital outlay or operating costs respectively.

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A Continuing Program

The school persons most concerned in improving and revising the curriculum are the chief school administrator and the administrative and instructional staffs, since they are the ones who deal with curriculum matters in their daily work.

Of all the agencies concerned with the curriculum, only the school board is held legally responsible. Even in delegating responsibilities to the administrator and the professional staff, the board cannot absolve itself from this legal responsibility, since it is responsible for the actions or omissions of its agents.

Without provision for professional assistance and counsel, the placing of this legal responsibility on the school board, whose members do not have the technical and professional training necessary for such responsibility, would have been a grave error. However, available to the board, by the very nature of the school program and recognized as proper procedure by professional educators, are the counsel and recommendations of the chief school administrator regarding curriculum matters. The successful school board has found it not only advisable but essential to encourage and support a continuing program of curriculum studies and research conducted by the instructional staff.

An important official, nominated by the chief school administrator, and employed by the board, leads in the organization of curriculum studies. His responsibility, in addition to leading in the planning and organization of curriculum studies and research, provides for leadership in helping individual teachers to improve their competence as teachers. This official is the curriculum supervisor. In large systems, he generally has a staff of assistants and heads an intensive program. In smaller systems he organizes on a smaller scale a similar program. Through his leadership, groups of teachers and the principals, in individual schools or across the system, explore curriculum problems. Such groups are constantly engaged in research and experimentation striving to improve the curriculum and the competence of the teacher in working with pupils.

When deemed appropriate, outside consultants are brought in for counsel on specific problems. Such studies, conducted at a "grass roots" level by teachers and principals who are daily faced with problems involved in developing a sound and effective curriculum, reveal the wisest course to be taken in dealing with proposed curriculum changes. The administrator, with his professional background and with the benefit of information gained from these studies, is enabled to make the kind of recommendations needed by the board in determining action to be taken.

School boards and administrators are nearly always under pressure from individuals and groups, such as professional politicians and civic, religious, patriotic, labor or business groups, to make changes in the curriculum or to give special emphasis on some particular item in the curriculum. These pressures have intensified since the advent of the man-made satellite and the missile age. School boards and administrators usually work together harmoniously and cooperatively even in spite of these pressures; both recognizing their areas of responsibility and the importance of not being stampeded into making unwise decisions. The NEA reported that of the 8140 superintendents serving the schools of America in 1959-60, only 169 were dismissed and 63 resigned under pressure. This total of 232 is less than 3 percent of the superintendents employed. Also, probably very few of these were involved in disagreements about the curriculum.

Providing for Change

Of course, there have been a number of situations, though relatively small considering the thousands of school districts in which harmony prevails, in which the pressures mentioned here or other causes have disturbed the relaxed and cooperative relationship existing between the board and the administrator. Sometimes outside issues of a controversial and perhaps highly emotional nature may be

injected into the schools' administration or planning and disturb the harmony existing. This may prevent clear thinking and wise planning. Sometimes an overly aggressive school board or one whose members are too independent to accept professional counsel will not follow the superintendent's recommendations and may make unwise decisions. Or a board may not have full confidence in the wisdom of the administrator. Such things, of course, impair teamwork and are injurious to the school system.

Perhaps if school authorities in their releases to the press concerning curriculum improvements were a little more careful to give both the school board and the professional staff credit for their participation, there would be better understanding by the public and more cordial relations between the board and staff.

Superintendent Morelle Emmons of the Lincoln Parish School Board, Ruston, Louisiana, in a recent letter to the author said that there is an unwritten agreement between the school board and the administrative and teaching personnel of his school system by which the program of instruction is constantly under study and subject to revision and change. This attitude enables lengthy examination of their local problems to be undertaken and carried to completion. The board encourages research and classroom experimentation and supports these projects when questioned by the public. This, he says, gives the teachers and administrator a secure foundation on which to build and revise curriculum organization and concept. The attitude expressed here is largely the attitude of successful school systems over the country.

As evidence of the interest school boards have in curriculum improvement, a few other instances, with which the author is familiar, are listed here. While these illustrations are from the author's own state, similar illustrations could be given from school systems all over the nation.

Since the beginning of the 1960-61 school session, the Calcasieu Parish School Board of Lake Charles has been holding one extra meeting a month for the purpose of studying all areas of the school program. These meetings are usually conducted by the supervisory staff of the central office and the discussions are devoted almost entirely to the instructional program. Out of these meetings have come significant curricular improvements.

Upon the recommendation of its superintendent, the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, unanimously adopted a resolution creating the East Baton Rouge Parish Survey Commission, entirely composed of Louisiana men with years of experience in public education. The Commission was formed for the purpose of making a survey of the schools of the parish and to make recommendations for improvement where needed. Members of the Commission contributed their services and the Board underwrote the cost for consultants used in making the investigation and securing statistical information. The survey covered a two-year period, 1957-58. The Commission spent many days in concentrated study and analysis before filing its report.

The Iberia Parish School Board, New Iberia, Louisiana, has given hearty support to a program in unit teaching in social studies in the elementary schools during the past two years. The program began with a summer social studies workshop for all teachers in the elementary grades. Consultants from the State

Department of Education and Louisiana State University assisted. In the summer of 1960, the program was extended to include demonstration lessons at each level. A consultant from the U.S. Office of Education was used and teachers from the East Baton Rouge Parish Schools demonstrated lessons at each grade level with pupils assigned to each grade. During the summer of 1961, a series of units on Latin America beginning at grade one was planned.

The Lafourche Parish School Board, Thibodaux, Louisiana, in 1951 authorized an adult academic program in its Golden Meadow school. The program was further extended the next year and now it is included in all of the schools in the system; both academic and nonacademic subjects are now taught. At the conclusion of the 1960-61 session, 128 adults received their diplomas.

The Lake Charles City School Board of Lake Charles, Louisiana, initiated the "Lake Charles Tenth Month Program." This is designed to enrich and extend the traditional school year for the abler and more interested pupils. In addition, it authorized the installation of a foreign language laboratory in the high school and approved experimental classes in French and German in the elementary schools as well as French in the junior high school.

The Monroe City School Board, Monroe, Louisiana, two months before Sputnik I made a national issue out of science education, initiated with the cooperation of the Forest Products Division of the Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation, a concentrated course in advanced chemistry. Thirty academically talented students had been tested previously at Neville High School, Monroe, and a challenging two-hours-daily course in college level chemistry was started. A teacher, famous for his ability to inspire and guide youngsters in the study of science, was secured. From the very beginning, the experiment was successful. The program has now been extended to make the course eligible to advanced students from all the four high schools in Monroe and West Monroe.

The Orleans Parish School Board, New Orleans, Louisiana, authorized experiments in accelerated and more extensive studies for its academically talented students by establishing the Benjamin Franklin High School, planned exclusively for these students. It also provided for experiments in educational television through its station WYEZ.

The Terrebonne Parish School Board, Houma, Louisiana, held a special meeting on June 13, 1961, to discuss the instructional program of the system. Some nine different programs or projects which are being conducted were reported on and discussed. One immediate result of the meeting was the authorization of the addition of a librarian for the summer school. Periodic informative, nonaction meetings of the school board provide for open, unbiased discussions and can be extremely beneficial.

In conclusion, a school board which is capable, judicious, and openminded and willing to give proper consideration to the recommendations of its chief school administrator regarding proposed curriculum changes should make few unwise curriculum decisions. This is especially true where the administrator's counsel is supported by the results of intensive and adequate study by the instructional staff. Caution is needed to see that local action conforms to the limitations or requirements set by authorities on the state or county (parish) level.

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