A look at the process of curriculum change in a political arena . . .

Political Know-How in Curriculum Improvement

DALE C. DRAPER
Professor, Educational Administration
San Francisco State College, San Francisco, California

LATE in the last day of the 1967 session of the California State Legislature, a committee of four powerful legislators worked feverishly to resolve differences between the Senate and Assembly versions of a measure which has been called the Magna Carta of California education. They never made it, for the author of the bill, also one of the committee members, said he would prefer to have the bill die rather than have it "gutted" by the proposed amendment.

The issue was whether or not the word "daily" should be included in that part of a revision of the California Education Code relating to physical education. Lobbyists for physical education teachers wanted the Legislature to continue to mandate daily physical education. Nearly all of the other professional organizations, including the California Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (CASCD), were on record and were working for the elimination of the daily physical education requirement.

Ironically, this one issue was the only "hang up" in a major effort to remove from the Education Code many legislated, specific, curricular requirements and to give to the State Board of Education the responsibility for the development and maintenance of guidelines and minimum standards for educational programs. The measure would have given school districts the flexibility needed to develop curricular programs responsive to changing and unique community conditions. The defeat of this legislative proposal is an example of how political know-how can influence curriculum change.

The background to this confrontation between a small group of educators on one side and the rest of the education establishment and important segments of the State Legislature on the other is complex. It has its roots in a concept of government existing in California which limits governmental agencies to only those activities which have been prescribed by law rather than permitting them to do all things necessary to accomplish their purposes except those which are prohibited. Since

schools need to do many things, much has been mandated. Here are a few examples of curriculum items in the Education Code which have been mandated very specifically.

Mandated Curriculum

In grades 1 through 6, a "minimum of 50 percent of each school week shall be devoted to reading, writing, language study, spelling, arithmetic, and civics." In grades 7 and 8, a "minimum of 600 minutes of each school week shall be devoted to such subjects."

In elementary schools, beginning not later than grade 4, instruction shall be given in "English as a separate subject with emphasis on thoroughness, and as a discipline separate from the subject of social studies."

Instruction in physical education follows eight stated aims and purposes. All pupils in junior and senior high schools "shall be required to attend upon the courses of physical education for an instructional period in each school day which shall not be less than the length of the regular academic periods of the school." In elementary schools, instructional periods "shall not be less than 20 minutes exclusive of recesses and the lunch period."

Many of the specific regulations were "put on the books" at the request of educators who, up until the Sputnik era, were able to make educational policy and influence legislators somewhat privately as a part of their administrative responsibilities. However, after Sputnik, educational politics became public politics. Legislators became distrustful of educators and began to develop their own resource staffs and to call on citizens advisory groups, some of which were hostile to school people. During this period, several measures were passed, strenuously opposed by educators, which were, nevertheless, the legislators' version of what was good education. Looking back, some of these enactments improved school programs and some were unworkable.

During the early part of their isolation from the political arena, educators wobbled between fulminating at their impotence and licking their wounds. Later they began to see how they could adjust and be effective at educational decision making in the public arena. Several professional education groups like the California Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (CAHPER) and the California Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (CASCD), which had not been active politically, began to tool-up for political action.

Legislators began to be more receptive to advice from educators. This shift in position came not only from increased confidence in educators, but also from a desire by the legislature to avoid the "static" they had received because of unworkable regulations and to change their responsibility from dealing with many specific proposals about curriculum and instruction to considering more fundamental and long-range aspects of education.

For example, during the 1967 session, 4,580 bills relating to education were introduced. Only 268 were approved by both Houses and signed by the Governor. Legislators were frustrated by the duplication among bills and the minute detail required to study adequately each bill introduced. So, in other fields of public concern as well as education,

the Legislature began moving toward a more permissive philosophy of government.

Political Action Machinery

The efforts of professional organization in education to be more influential in proposing, supporting, or opposing legislation were directed toward setting up or improving the political action machinery within each organization and coordinating their activities with other organizations. CASCD, as one of these organizations, had to develop its legislative relationships from "scratch." The early stages of this activity might be called the "fire department" phase or level of involvement.

The activity was largely that of responding to a series of bonfires. That is, a bill would be introduced which curriculum workers wanted to support or oppose, so they would write or talk to their assemblyman or state senator or the chairman of the Education Committee. At each stage, when the bill reached committee hearings in each house, debate on the floor, and consideration by the Governor, the process had to be repeated.

This approach, to be effective, calls for a Paul Revere who will be alert to the signals and sound the alarm at the right time, and for a large number of Minute Men to write the letters and make the phone calls that are needed. Such a volunteer apparatus was set up in CASCD and operated during the mandated curriculum confrontation. The approach did enable those conscientious curriculum workers who had been watching the legislative merry-go-round to make some contribution and perhaps feel less uninvolved.

There is no way of knowing what influence this activity had on the Legislature. This kind of political activity is an important part of any comprehensive program for influencing legislation. By itself, intermittent contacts with legislators about pending legislation are probably not effective and certainly provide little opportunity for educators to propose legislation for the improvement of education.

To attain some of its objectives, CASCD has begun to move toward a more initiatory and continuing relationship with the Legislature. This might be called the "lobbyist" level of political activity. This activity involves developing a defined position about some aspect of education, obtaining support from other professional groups and an effective working relationship with members of the Legislature.

As a beginning step, an assessment was made of those interests of the Legislature which coincided with interests of CASCD. Four such interests were, for example: pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs, particularly for children in disadvantaged areas; assessment and evaluation of pupil achievement; teacher licensure standards and procedures; and lessening legislative curriculum mandates. For these areas, and others, special interest committees were asked to prepare resolutions to be presented at the annual association convention and position papers for general use.

These committees were also asked to suggest changes in existing statutes and to supply data and examples of experience to support their position papers. When written and approved by the

Association, the position papers were used to enlist the support of other professional organizations in the position taken and the desired legislative proposal.

On the assumption that legislators are influenced most by constituents they know and trust, the Association established a legislative representation group. These persons have the responsibility to become well acquainted with each of the 120 state legislators, to keep them informed as to the interests of CASCD, and, hopefully, to be one of the persons the legislator feels like going to for information about educational matters. Legislators "trust" a person when the advice and information given is technically accurate, relevant, and politically viable.

To help the legislative contact persons to be more effective, training sessions have been held at each of the last three CASCD annual conventions. At these sessions, members were acquainted with the legislative process as it currently operates and the techniques for working with legislators. Incidentally, one of the "secrets," if it can be called that, of the success of the physical education association was its legislative contact system. For years, members of this association have maintained good relations with each of the legislators. During the confrontation described earlier, they knew who were the key members of the Legislature, both generally and on specific issues. They knew to whom the legislators listened, whether inside or outside the Legislature or "back home." They knew the cleavages and power struggles in the state government. They also knew which legislators were former athletes; that the Speaker of the House exercised daily to keep in physical trim; and that the State Superintendent of Education was a former coach. All of this information and more helped the association to be effective.

Part of the success of CAHPER was due to its attention to developing good will in the legislators' home communities, an important factor in that issue. Political scientists state that in many efforts to change or improve society only a small group of persons are involved either in promoting or opposing the proposal. Generally, they say, most people are inactive—neither supporting nor opposing. However, this large passive group becomes active and influential when there is some change in national or local climate of opinion, or when there is a threat to some cherished value.

For example, CAHPER made use of the prevailing sentiment for physical fitness emphasized by President Kennedy and kept active by several factors. CAHPER was able to call on community leaders, particularly doctors, in many legislative districts to write and speak on their behalf because their cause was popular and they had a store of goodwill in many communities. This back-home, on-the-job phase of political activity, i.e., the continuing effort to build a favorable climate of opinion for modern educational programs, is frequently overlooked by school people. It seems remote from the political scene.

We educators tend to be politically active only in times of crises and then only to "put pressure on the legislator." However, it is this activity, i.e., doing

a good job, telling people about it, and involving members of the community in our planning, that develops the good will often needed in political activity.

The importance of local political activity was pointed out by Morley Segal, Assistant Professor of Social and Behavioral Science of California State College at Hayward, who, at the first CASCD political action training session, told the group, "If you really want to influence the Legislature, there's nothing like helping somebody get elected." Educators in California in 1966 set up an organization to do just that. Funds were channeled to those districts to re-elect influential members of the Legislature and to elect new members who would work for improved education in the state.

Educators also rang door bells, did clerical work, plus other mundane jobs to help these persons get elected. The first efforts of this organization were quite successful. Since participation by educators in partisan election campaigns is a new activity, it is too soon to tell what the long-range effect will be on both state government and education.

The activities which have been described in this article represent an example of pluralism in political decision making. That is, in the contention over daily physical education requirement, political influence was dispersed among many small interest groups. Also, while relatively few persons were directly involved in the decision, their influence depended upon the support of other special interest groups and a prevailing public belief in physical fitness. The decision-making process did not achieve the goal of equality of our democratic creed, which we as educators vigorously advocate, but neither was it a decision made by a continuing cohesive power elite, a pattern more characteristic of earlier public decision making.

Strategies for Change

What are the implications of political strategies employed at state and city levels for curriculum change in school districts? What can a curriculum worker, e.g., a teacher, principal, or consultant, who has an idea and the desire to improve instruction do to have this idea adopted and put into operation?

As an early step, the person should accept the notion that most innovations have been started by individuals or small groups who either put into definite form some generally desired but vaguely defined good or who saw somewhat ahead of most people how the current practice could be improved; and who put forth the time and energy necessary to design and promote the proposal. Acting on this premise, perhaps the curriculum worker can more easily accept the responsibility for initiating change no matter where he or she is on the totem pole. Hierarchies rarely have monolithic values and interests, so the idea is likely to find support and resistance at all levels of the school system.

The curriculum worker as an innovator has an added obligation. That is, while it may be more effective in the short run to involve as few people as possible in a proposed curriculum change, curriculum workers are committed to an ethic of decision making which encourages wide participation.

While attempting to have a sound proposal adopted, the curriculum worker may need to give attention to details that are sometimes overlooked. Considerable information and insight will be needed as to how decisions are actually made in the school, who is likely to be influential in deciding a certain issue, what are prevailing sentiments among teachers, parents, administrators, board members, and others of the community (particularly professionals in other community and organizations with related interests).

Knowledge about the differences and cleavages within and among these groups will also be helpful. For curriculum workers, this may mean they should participate in more groups than is customary, such as meetings of the administrative staff, the counselors, PTA boards and councils, civic and community groups, and political parties. As a starter, they may have to invite themselves. Interested, competent, willing workers are generally quite welcome. This may mean that meeting with "outside" groups may have to be the curriculum worker's avocation as well as his profession.

In addition to building a bank of good will and working directly for curriculum change, curriculum workers might also consider working for the selection of the "right" people for key decision-making positions such as legislators, board members, and school administrators. The "right" people are those whose decisions are shaped more by educational factors than by political or economic factors.

Postscript: The 1968 session of the California State Legislature began in early January. Shortly thereafter, a bill was introduced to remove state mandated curriculum details similar to the one introduced a year ago. In the preceding several months, representatives of several physical education associations met with the executive boards of the other professional organizations to state their belief in the daily physical education requirement. These organizations again resolved that the requirement should be removed from the statute and that physical education regulations should be left to the State Board of Education. So, as you read this, the process of curriculum change in a political arena has begun again.

Influences in Curriculum Change

Papers of the
ASCD Commission on Current Curriculum Developments

Edited by Glenys G. Unruh and Robert R. Leeper

Price: $2.25 Pages: 128

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

Copyright © 1968 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.