

A Better Curriculum Through Negotiation?

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SCHOOLS may be better in the future than they are now. At the very least, the current teacher shortage may be reduced. Teacher militancy in its present form is contributing significantly to this change. Many states which have not as yet experienced teacher militancy to any large degree soon will either accommodate increasing national demands of teachers or have repeat performances of Florida, Michigan, or New York City.

Times have been tough with bargaining, strikes, picketing, and court battles. Nevertheless, higher salaries and improved working conditions have been the consequences of teachers' having a greater share in budgetary decision making.

At least 10 states currently have legal provisions for mandatory negotiations between teachers and school boards. An additional 15 states had bills introduced last year to provide for negotiation. One of the difficulties of speaking about the implications of negotiation is the variation in the terms of the law governing negotiation among the states as well as the various operational adaptations of the law in districts within states. One point appears clear, however: there is a tendency for bargaining teams to use the labor-management model, with management, through a process of compromise, giving away part of that which formerly had been held.

Very few contracts have included in them specific curriculum and instructional matters as of this date. However, such items as the number of field trips, the move from graded to ungraded schools, and the grade level at which foreign language begins are examples of what many expect in future negotiations once salaries are considered by teachers to be respectable.

Consequences of Negotiation

These examples highlight our real challenge. It is true that the determination of curriculum policy and instructional procedures has been dominated by local boards of education and administrators in far too many

American school districts. Teachers have not been involved in decision making to the degree that many of us feel is necessary. Mandatory negotiation will assure teachers a stronger voice; and new teacher power could move the profession into a stronger position of collaboration in the improvement of schools. Yet, at least three potentially divisive consequences of negotiation must be obviated.

- First, collective bargaining and/or negotiation of curriculum and instruction is anathema to cooperative curriculum development. It may not be exaggerated to envisage a high school Latin teacher compromising on some aspect of the kindergarten curriculum or an elementary music teacher giving up the junior high after-school program while gaining an expanded musical assembly program for the elementary schools. This is intended only to suggest that closed-door, far-into-the-night bargaining presents a seemingly impossible vehicle for intelligent curriculum decision making.

One response to this charge is that the teacher bargaining team can be representative and the team can maintain channels of communication with teachers, thus assuring all teachers a voice at the bargaining table. At best, this is true only until serious bargaining begins. It is also argued that the contract need not be ratified by teachers who are dissatisfied. This is possible.

Nonetheless, as the number of curriculum matters on the table increases, the more divisive program development will become. Should a vote determine balance in the curriculum? We are not now negotiating many curriculum and instructional matters. Would it not be far wiser to negotiate *time* for in-service curriculum development to permit cooperative and systematic program evaluation and improvement?

- Another consequence of the cohesiveness of teachers' organizations and accompanying militancy is an extension of organization by other professionals. Superintendents have been organized into AASA, yet now this organization has raised its membership qualifications and, certainly, its conference agendas have changed. Middle management, principals, are organizing locally and are asking for bargaining rights with boards of education. In Michigan, principals have joined the superintendents and the School Board Association to form a statewide Congress of School Administrators which speaks of the management team concept. There has been a strong move by supervisors in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development to organize for welfare and other purposes.

These organizational movements pose some interesting questions in a day of increasing influence of technology and Federal funds upon the school curriculum. There are more specialists in our schools today, mainly in supportive roles to the teachers. It is neither unreasonable nor necessarily an undesirable possibility to assume that the present teacher's role will be fractionated and accommodated by several persons. We might find, for example, specialists in diagnosis of learning needs, achievement evaluators, as well as professionals who teach skills, knowledge, and concepts, if indeed the latter three are done by a single individual. Will these new specialists also organize and seek bargaining rights; or, if we go the master teacher route, will the teachers organize and bargain as higher and lower echelon professionals?

Such a discussion could reach a ridiculous but possibly very real conclusion. That we shall need skilled professionals with a variety of talents and specialties appears clear; the direction the specialists take in establishing and maintaining themselves in the "bargaining" arena is a serious question. Could it not be possible for their bargaining to be restricted to economic matters, leaving curriculum and instruction to in-service program development? And, would it not be more professional to delineate the time and process of curriculum development, permitting change to result from cooperative study and analysis?

- A third consequence of master contracts between boards of education and teachers is the least understood. Interpersonal problems and frustrations are created for both teachers and administrators who find themselves inhibited by terms of a contract which includes articles on curriculum and instruction. Bargaining teams, both teacher and board, probably can never have sufficient foresight to write a contract which will satisfy the needs of an energetic and innovative staff.

It is difficult for a professional to believe that large group instruction, for example, has been stopped in some school systems because the contract cited 32 as maximum class size. Contracts will become more sophisticated and we will learn how to "live within them" better than we now do; the fact remains, however, that a contract dictates limits. It is important that these limits not squeeze the profession into one impasse after another in curriculum development.

A Unified Profession

These consequences challenge movement toward a unified profession. Yet, there is increasing unity within teacher, administration, and supervisory groups. The same is probably true among university personnel and professionals in Research and Development Centers and regional laboratories. We remind ourselves often that developers should be closer to the practitioner (the adopter). We say that educational change is a human process, dependent upon interaction, evaluation, feedback. Many innovations such as team teaching, nongraded elementary, and flexible schedules no doubt facilitate educational improvement if they are conceived properly, but change of any real consequence comes as teachers and administrators behave more humanely and intelligently toward each other and toward their pupils. This behavior does not emerge from the bargaining table nor from living in isolation.

A unified teaching staff with concomitant principal and supervisory groups will not be enough to cope with important educational decisions no matter how high salaries go. Indeed, polarized grouping can be, and surely is, divisive. Our professional task is far too complex for any single group to provide all the needed input for intelligent decision making. Teachers do not have time nor the expertise for research. Research and development must increasingly be provided by specialized agencies.

If development is to be meaningful, however, teachers must be involved both in providing direction for research and development and in testing and implementing innovation. Furthermore, what we are learning about the importance of a catalytic agent in changing teacher behavior

hardly suggests isolation of teacher groups from administrators and supervisors. Supportive relationships so important to self-enhancement and teaching improvement can be built only through trust and mutual cooperation.

Time for in-service education, and probably far more than we have generally had, is an imperative if the diverse talents of our professional staff are to be released.

A unified professional staff, unified by a commitment to the improvement of curriculum and instruction, is possible in school districts which have negotiated master contracts. Bargaining in Michigan this past summer was very difficult in many districts; schools did not open on schedule in seven communities. On the other hand, there were many preschool workshops in which this commitment to self-improvement and to better schools was clearly present.

One such workshop composed of an elementary school staff, the principal, and a university resource person utilized the talents of the participants as well as those of the superintendent, assistant superintendent for personnel, curriculum director, pupils, parents, music consultant, art consultants, the school secretary, and the custodian. There was no "we" and "they" talk; no compromise bargaining; the professionals were building curriculum, trust, and mutual support.

Clearly, there has been a shift of power in educational decision making. We need strong leadership from both teachers and administrators to develop viable in-service models for curriculum improvement. Without such leadership, the divisiveness which tends to result from compromise bargaining, professional separatism, and contract limits on creative curriculum building can only retard our efforts to improve schools.

Administrators and curriculum workers have been more articulate in writing and speaking about democratic curriculum development and involvement of teachers than has actually occurred in practice. Time for systematic evaluation and development may bring practice much closer to what we have been saying we should do.

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