Federal Involvement in Curriculum Development?

Gordon Cawelti

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SERIOUS consideration is now being given by officials at the National Institute of Education to the issue of federal involvement in curriculum development projects. ASCD members are urged to give their attention to this matter and communicate their feelings on the issue to me or association officers.

Last September the National Council on Educational Research requested NIE Director Harold Hodgkinson to study the value of curriculum change as an aid to schools and to arrange for a dialogue on the need for future funding in this area. The council's recommendation came in response to a report from a committee headed by Roald Campbell. This committee recommended that "NIE devote explicit and public attention to issues of the present value of curriculum development as a strategy for aiding schools." The Campbell report gave particular attention to the role of regional labs in curriculum matters.

In December, Jon Schaffarzick was appointed coordinator of the NIE Curriculum Development Task Force. He subsequently consulted with such persons as John Goodlad and Decker Walker in preparing a report. Several professional organizations, including ASCD, were consulted in the process of preparing a discussion guide, "Current Issues, Problems, and Concerns in Curriculum Development."[1] At this writing, plans have been made for Hodgkinson and Schaffarzick to discuss the report with ASCD leaders at the 1976 Annual Conference in Miami.

The report reveals that, as a result of talking with a large number of people, it is clear that persons from all levels want to be involved in curriculum development, and that there is a feeling of impotence or having limited influence even when they are asked about curriculum issues. The feeling was repeatedly expressed that resolution of curriculum issues should be made at the local level.

Not much attention was given in this report to the issue of the relationship between legislators and agencies insofar as censorship is concerned. Yet it seems clear to me that this has reappeared as a matter of

[1] Unpublished, dated January 15, 1976. 81 pp.

serious concern here in Washington. Some members of Congress feel that they should have veto power on projects that are to be funded, a position which places no trust in the collaborative work of practicing teachers and scholars. Although proposed legislation calling for "prior review" by the Congress was recently defeated, the desire to exercise control on this issue expresses itself in other ways. This raises the question, "Who should decide what instruction is appropriate for children of various ages?"

Another serious problem has developed in connection with certain National Science Foundation projects. This is the question of transferring instructional products, researched and developed through public funds, to the private sector (the publisher). How does one decide which publisher gets the new product and how are royalties to be handled?

A "Patchwork" Curriculum

Controversy also arose in connection with *Man: A Course of Study* which was produced with federal funds. Representative John Conlan has charged that the federal government has no right to use federal funds to help disseminate any one curricular program more than another. He succeeded in having *all* of some $9 million struck from the NSF budget for dissemination of new science and social studies programs rather than be accused of censorship by striking only MACOS.

My impression is that the federal government has served to provide "start-up" activities in certain areas that someone gets concerned about such as drug education, consumer education, metric education, and career education. The government has done so because the school curriculum has been adjudged to be inadequate in responding to a personal or societal concern. As a result, the federal role has perpetuated a "patchwork" curriculum in the schools. Those of us in curriculum development work are responsible because we have spent much time running after small grants known to be available.

I have seen almost no concern at the federal level for issues of general education or common learnings which I believe desperately need to be reexamined in an era when alternatives, action learning, and team teaching receive the bulk of our attention. I would hope that ASCD members would exert their influence to see that the federal involvement in curriculum development provides leadership on some of the larger issues—the whole rather than always a small part. Few districts or even states are able to do a very good job at that, but most can develop a program in consumer education, for example, if they decide they want to.

We must develop a process within ASCD to assure that we can respond promptly and thoroughly when government agencies such as NIE come to us with a genuine problem they are seeking to help resolve.

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Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1977	March 19-23	Houston	*Civic Center*
1978	March 4-8	San Francisco	*Civic Center*
1979	March 3-7	Detroit	*Cobo Hall*
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