How We Defined Our Core Curriculum

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The best place for high school reform is on the local level as in Weston, Massachusetts, where citizens and faculty agreed on a set of courses "essential for all students."

After decades of building, the American dream for universal, free secondary education was finally achieved in the early 1960s when the overwhelming majority of the country's youth was enrolled in high schools. . . . There had been strains on the system of high schools as it grew; now that it is fully in place, the stresses are more insistently apparent—raising the question of whether the high school model we had constructed for all American youth is in fact as wisely designed as possible. Today, with some 20 years of actual experience with mass secondary education behind us, a fresh and honest look at high schools is needed.

—*Theodore R. Sizer, "A Study of High Schools—A Prospectus," 1980.*[1]

Without prejudging the eventual value of current national projects for high school reform, local school districts, pressed with local school problems, are asking themselves about the nature of their schools today and tomorrow.

Local Problems

The most immediate problem is a fact of life in almost all American school systems—declining enrollment and rising costs. Most school districts provide an extraordinary range of courses and programs, unmatched in the history of American schooling. As Sizer notes:

> Behind these diverse courses and curricula lies an equally diverse set of goals: to prepare some students for college and university attendance, while preparing others for work; to integrate, socially and academically, students pursuing these varied curricula; to provide for such special needs as vocational training, the education of the handicapped, and courses for the academically talented; and to offer humane custodial care, and even programs for the many students with no sense of vocation or destination, and nowhere else to go.[2]

But it is no longer possible for local districts to offer a wide range of programs. Trapped between plunging enrollments and skyrocketing costs, districts today face questions of priorities as never before.

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Added impetus for local examination of educational priorities comes from the growing concern that American education has lost its way. Schools were once seen—or are seen through hindsight—as institutions that transmitted essential skills, knowledge, and the culture's values, thereby preparing citizens for democracy. Now many fear that schools have failed. Beginning at the college level—for example, Harvard College's recent definition of a "core curriculum"—many institutions are redefining skills and subject matter deemed essential for young people in our culture to learn.

Although it is disquieting for some members of our profession, we think this re-examination is healthy. The new wave of national studies should produce useful visions of American education's future. Careful adaptation of these visions may exert a positive influence on local school systems. In the meantime we predict enrollment and economic pressures on local districts will prompt a local re-examination of the nature and purposes of schools, reinforcing the lay control so fundamental to our system of free public education.

Core Curriculum: The Issues

Many school districts, including our own, are debating educational needs and priorities as they attempt to define their own core curriculum. What is a core curriculum? Not surprisingly, definitions vary. Generally a core curriculum can be defined as those courses that convey the essential skills and knowledge valued by the school district. These courses reflect the district's vision of what should be common to all students' education. Core curriculum courses provide a common intellectual foundation and lay the groundwork for further study. They reflect the faculty's shared thinking about what is essential to learn and embrace skills, concepts, events, and authors necessary for further study in a discipline. Core curriculum courses deal with central questions of human existence—past, present, and future.

What should be included in a district's core curriculum? The question is difficult to answer because it immediately propels a school district into value-laden debates with answers that sound deceptively simple—even simplistic. You might quickly conclude, for example, that in this technological age college-bound students should study four years of mathematics in high school, as well as biology, chemistry, and physics. But would you reach this conclusion if all those required courses prevented a few from taking several years of two foreign languages? Or kept a talented violinist from studying music in both a band and orchestra, as well as taking a music tutorial for credit?

The faculty of our secondary schools has just completed 18 months of discussion and debate "to identify those courses and content deemed essential for all graduates of the Weston Public Schools, and to ascertain whether those courses should be required or recommended for students." Ours is a college preparatory suburban high school from which over 90 percent of the graduates go on to higher education. The faculty is unusually strong and often independent, yet it reached consensus on a plan that identifies a core curriculum and sub-

stantially upgrades graduation requirements. We bumped into several hard issues along the rocky road to consensus; some were anticipated but others surprised us. They included:

1. *Should a core curriculum be expressed in terms of skills or courses?* There are many ways to conceptualize a core curriculum. At the post-secondary level Columbia College introduced "core courses" in humanities and contemporary civilization in the 1920s to build a common intellectual background for its students. Today Harvard College's new definition of a core of intellectual skills aims to help its students progress through a range of alternative courses.

We believe secondary schools have an even greater responsibility than colleges to develop the underlying foundation of skills, concepts, and content needed for success in school and beyond. Even though some high school courses are more concerned with skill development than content transmission, we found it clearer and easier to associate a core curriculum with specific courses such as world history or biology rather than trying to specify in detail the skills to be acquired in each subject area. Moreover, emphasizing course content ensures that students obtain an essential education in the future when declining enrollments will force reduction of elective courses.

2. *Should a core curriculum be required or recommended?* We quickly concluded that not requiring courses identified as part of a core curriculum would be a contradiction in terms. Moreover, while there were many courses we might recommend to students, we decided a core curriculum should be limited to those academic experiences that we believe *all* students should have in common.

3. *Will a core curriculum reduce the flexibility that students need to achieve individual goals in their high school program?* While delineation of a core curriculum imposes a common direction on all students' programs, it does not have to interfere with each student's opportunity to tailor a program to meet individual needs. In part this is a question of balance between requirements and electives. In our high school we found there was room to increase requirements to five courses per year without such interference. Careful analysis of student programs helped us conclude this and helped persuade those faculty who cared deeply about student choice and individual needs. In our analysis we also found many students had carried reduced, and often less academic, programs in their junior and senior years. We concluded these students could easily meet new requirements by adding one or two courses to their four-year programs.

4. *Would our proposed requirements be too difficult for some students to meet?* Clearly a core curriculum at the secondary level must be appropriate for a wide range of student abilities. We debated at length whether *all* students could handle the study of foreign language, science courses beyond biology, and mathematics beyond the sophomore year. We found no intrinsic reason why such courses should not be pursued by our students, except for the relatively few students with special needs whose programs would be modified under PL 94-142. We presume that courses in these areas can be taught at different levels, if need be, and that teachers have a responsibility in these courses to broaden instruction for the full range of students enrolled in them.

Our conclusion is similar to that reached by the College Board's National Symposium for Project Equality in May 1980.[3] Participants there represented school and college faculty members and representatives of major educational associations or public authorities. Despite vast differences in their backgrounds, these participants reached agreement on rigorous courses and competencies that should be required of all college-bound students.

5. *Turf.* Who wins and who loses—this was our toughest issue. Faced with steeply declining student enrollment and teacher layoffs, our faculty was understandably concerned about job security long before we began a discussion of core curriculum and new graduation requirements. Our discussions intensified this concern, as some people quickly translated any proposal into the number of jobs to be gained or lost in their department. Thankfully, this concern never dominated our debate. Indeed, the faculty displayed a remarkable ability to focus on key educational questions despite the turf issue. We found it particularly helpful to examine *actual enrollment patterns* of students in the most recent graduating class and to calculate the impact (in terms of shift in student enrollments from one department to another) that each proposed change in requirements would cause. This step tempered underlying anxiety with reality and served to focus questions of turf onto realistic questions of which departments would gain or lose, rather than allowing every department to assume it would lose too much.

6. *Will a core curriculum conflict with the comprehensive nature of high school?* For us, this was one of the most critical issues. Although ours is primarily a college preparatory high school, our entire faculty supported the idea that the fine and practical arts (art, music, industrial arts, home economics) as well as business education were essential components of our comprehensive program. Moreover, they felt *all* students should study in these curriculum areas. Even though none of these areas had ever been required, teachers were concerned that greater academic requirements would damage these programs by reducing students' chances to elect them. Our faculty resolved this issue by instituting a broad requirement (six semesters of study) in the fine and practical arts and business education as part of our core curriculum.

Steps to a Core Curriculum

These issues we faced required 18 months to resolve. But how does a local school district—without benefit of large foundation grants, national study commissions, or a staff of distinguished scholars—address these issues? While different districts should have different approaches, we believe three elements are important to bear in mind as a district plans its process for defining a core curriculum.

First, a core curriculum should reflect the values and aspirations of the parents and community served by the schools. A fundamental precept of the American educational system is the right of the public to define appropriate educational programs for its children. Of necessity, this right is delegated to local school boards and to state or national boards whose members are elected directly by the public or appointed by elected officials. The task of defining a core curriculum presents an opportunity for schools to identify educational values and goals currently held by the community. Many approaches are possible: (1) discussion among board members themselves (who are elected to represent community values); (2) a series of discussion groups with randomly chosen public representatives; (3) a year-long seminar with faculty and public representatives; (4) a formal survey of the

entire community, and so forth. In our town, the school board mails a lengthy attitude survey to all households every few years. The survey contains nearly 100 questions and seeks residents' opinions about educational priorities as well as their attitudes about our programs in academic areas, the arts, athletics, and extracurricular activities. A computer tabulates the results and the school board analyzes them as one source of information about the community's values and opinions.

Second, make informed decisions rather than ignorant decisions. There *are* experts and they often have sensible things to say about what students should learn. For example, computers are changing the nature of mathematics that students should learn. While members of the public can give their opinions in a survey, chances are they will not be experts. Thus, local school boards should also invite scholars to discuss with the faculty what should be taught and learned in mathematics, history, English, and other disciplines. If the scholars are community residents, they may perform this service without charge. If not, for a comparatively small cost school districts can purchase their participation in a workshop, seminar, or a lengthier review of specific programs. In our community, the school board commissions "program reviews" on a regular basis. An independent review committee—composed of local residents, students, faculty, and renowned university scholars—evaluates the school district's curriculum in a single discipline. This committee spends several days observing classes in that discipline, interviewing students, faculty, and parents, and reviewing curriculum materials and student work. It then prepares a detailed report commending laudable aspects of the program and recommending changes where appropriate.

Finally, the elected school board, with recommendations from its professional staff, must make the ultimate decisions about the nature of the core curriculum. While curriculum must reflect the public's values and the experts' opinions, it is the professional staff that bears responsibility for designing and carrying out the entire instructional program. Like professionals anywhere, the teaching staff and its administrators must be deeply involved in defining the core curriculum. They should consider carefully public sentiments, expert suggestions, as well as their own professional opinions, and then recommend to their school board the appropriate courses.

With these three precepts, our process was rather simple. Since over the years our school board had conducted periodic surveys of community attitudes and program reviews in almost every discipline, we were prepared to identify courses and content "deemed essential for all graduates" of Weston High School. Our answers emerged from the following process:

Step 1: Each department developed long-range curriculum plans to illustrate their adjustment to declining enrollment. Many plans flowed logically from earlier program reviews. Departments then answered the question "What in our area is essential for students to learn?"

Step 2: Department heads and key administrators met to analyze each department's response, identified issues to resolve and, ultimately, defined four models for a core curriculum.

Step 3: The full faculty discussed the issues and models, hearing directly from colleagues about matters of crucial importance. Though strenuous at times, these discussions were a welcome relief from the more frequent budget-cutting discussions of recent years.

Step 4: Key administrators developed a single proposal based on comments from faculty and department heads.

Step 5: The full faculty, in a process designed with the assistance of a faculty advisory committee, debated the proposal, proposed alternatives, argued, hassled, worried—and eventually endorsed a proposal.

Step 6: With the faculty's position now clearly defined, the superintendent and assistant superintendent, with the high school principal and department chairpersons, discussed the proposal in a series of meetings with students and parents. Comments from these groups were weighed carefully before making final recommendations to the school board.

Step 7: The school board received the proposal and reactions to it from students and parents. It discussed and debated the proposal and eventually adopted a core curriculum and significantly higher standards for graduation.

The Value of Defining Your Own Core Curriculum

Simple as it may sound, this process was far more complex and time-consuming than merely waiting for the recommendations of one of the national studies currently under way. Indeed, therein lies both the temptation and the danger. It *would* be far easier to follow the expert advice of those prestigious groups, but to do so would surrender the important role of faculty, parents, students, and school board at the local level. Because national solutions may not suit local needs, it is imperative for each school district to determine its own answers.

What is the value of defining a core curriculum? For our district, there have been two benefits for faculty and three for students. The faculty now has a clear statement of values and educational commitment. We take pride in the process we used and the results we achieved. Our core curriculum also provides a standard for deciding what courses must be preserved as enrollment declines. There is also greater certainty about faculty positions that will remain viable in future years.

For students, our project has upgraded curriculum requirements and thereby ensured a more rigorous education for many. It has defined the common base of knowledge that gives unique character to our school district's program and also makes possible study at more advanced levels based on common program elements. Finally, definition of a core curriculum has promoted schoolwide understanding about the educational purpose of our school and its curriculum.

Without question we are entering a period when national attention will focus on secondary schools and on the question of what all students should learn. The flurry of national studies currently under way testifies to the breadth and depth of concern. But local school districts should not sit back and wait to be told what to do. The process of developing local standards is an exciting one, despite the hard issues involved. Every school district can develop its own vision of what is essential for students to learn. While the process may vary, we suspect the results will be remarkably similar. And when the task is completed, each district can take pride in its own "fresh and honest look." ■

[1] Theodore Sizer and others, "A Study of High Schools—A Prospectus," (November 1980), p.1.

[2] Ibid.

[3] G. Hanford, *Preferred Patterns of Preparation for College: A Statement*. (New York: The College Board, 1981).