Who should make curriculum decisions?
The Boston experience

by Kim Marshall

When Dr. Robert R. Spillane became superintendent of the Boston schools in August 1981, he confronted curriculum anarchy. For a variety of reasons, there had been no city-wide curriculum in the city’s schools for years. Many teachers did their own thing; some clung to the outdated curriculum guides of the 1970s; some followed commercial textbooks; and a few schools and districts wrote their own curriculum objectives. The challenge that Dr. Spillane faced revolved around this question: what kinds of curriculum decisions should teachers make about what and how they teach? Put more precisely, what is the proper balance between curriculum decision-making at the central office and the school level?

In formulating his policy, Dr. Spillane was influenced by three currents of thought. First, there was his strong conviction that the school building is the key site of educational decision-making; he made an early commitment to move more power to the principals and the headmasters of the system. Second, there was the evidence of recent research that clear academic goals are essential to effective urban schools. And third, there was his observation that many of the curriculum materials generated by central office staffs in cities around the United States ended up gathering dust on teachers’ shelves, lacking the key ingredients of ownership and relevance to teachers’ particular needs and tastes.

These currents, seemingly contradictory in terms of a curriculum policy, suggested a division of labor between the central office and the school site. Curriculum objectives would be determined by the central office, mandated city-wide, and monitored by criterion-referenced tests geared to the curriculum. The methods and materials for teaching the objectives would be determined by teachers, who would choose from the wide variety of materials and approaches on the market. Teachers would make their decisions under the supervision of their principals and headmasters, drawing on colleagues, administrators, university consultants, commercial resources, and a district-level curriculum implementation and professional development office.

This approach is both appealing and simplistic. It has the virtue of treating teachers as professionals and putting key decisions in the hands of those who work most closely with children. On the other hand, it runs the risk of giving too little or too much direction to teachers. The success of the policy depends on the quality of the curriculum objectives, the form that the testing program takes, and the kind of support that is given to teachers as they determine the methods and materials they are going to use.

Only the first piece of the policy has been introduced to the elementary and middle schools of the system. Detailed curriculum objectives for K-8 mathematics and reading/language arts are in the hands of all teachers, backed up by a two-hour briefing from principals, a preliminary pretest, and a brochure explaining the objectives to parents at each level. The full testing program, the remaining objectives, and the curriculum and professional support—all these are still in the making.

But the initial reception to the K-8 objectives and the overall policy has been extremely positive. Teachers and principals like the clear, city-wide direction given by the objectives, and appreciate the amount of “running room” they are given in finding the best ways of reaching the objectives. The ingredients in our successful start are: objectives with specific examples of what students are expected to accomplish; assurances that competency tests will be geared precisely to the new objectives; and plenty of support for principals as educational leaders.

We feel that this approach to curriculum decision making represents the best compromise between uniformity and diversity. It solves the problem of disparate objectives and insures that students who move from school to school...
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will encounter the same basic material. At the same time, it does not needlessly
bind up the energy and individualism of
teachers and principals with mandated
materials and approaches. By limiting
the role of the central office and
challenging teachers and principals to
find the best ways of teaching the city-
wide objectives, and by providing the
necessary support where it is needed, we
expect there to be a flowering of
curriculum development where it stands
the best chance of affecting children—in
each school building.

Kim Marshall, Ed.M. ’81, was a special
assistant to Superintendent Robert R. Spillane
in 1981-82, and is now director of the
Curriculum Objectives Development Unit of
the Boston public schools.

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vacuum. The educational community
and the wider community have a right to
establish the range of skills, concepts,
ideas, as well as the intellectual and
moral disposition which that community
hopes to see its students develop. Seeing
that our schools are so organized as to
pass students from teacher to teacher,
there need to be outlines, curriculum
guides, and scope and sequence charts if
students are to avoid my wife’s
experience of beginning each year of
social studies with the cavemen and
never getting past the Romans!

Teachers should make a significant
contribution to the establishment of the
broad educational goals which a commu-
ity establishes and should play a
major role in the development of the
outlines, guides, and charts. If these
outlines are to be helpful rather than
divisive, great care needs to be taken to
insure that the groups which do this
work represent the diversity which exists
within their educational community.

Such committees usually select
materials which, implicitly or explicitly,
include an outline or scope and sequence
charts. Teachers are then generally
directed to teach from the manual which
accompanies these materials. My own
preference would be otherwise. Why not
adopt the scope and sequence charts and
make all teachers accountable for
introducing their students to the skills
and concepts that they contain? There
will be teacher who will prefer,
for whatever reasons, to use the materials
which the publisher has provided to go
along with those outlines. And there will
be others who will not; who will choose

instead to keep that sequency in the
back of their mind as they select from a
broader range of materials and
approaches which they have encountered
in their training and experience, and
which they consider to be most suited to
helping a student at a particular time
with a particular problem.

This approach would be likely to make
many people quite anxious, not the least
being many teachers. The temptation
has been to take an alternative route,
and in my view a less educational one,
which attempts to "teacher-proof" a
curriculum which mandates texts with
carefully written teacher manuals. The
authority, the intellect, and the choices
reside then in the professors selected by
the publisher and in the committee or
individual who makes the selection—
none of whom have met the students
that the teacher encounters. In a very
real way, this enslaves the intellectual
and moral powers of teachers. Some of
the best teachers—perhaps those for
whom choice in their professional lives is
most important—do, in fact, make a
choice to leave the profession. Others do
what they are being tacitly invited to do,
which is to put their minds on one side
and follow the teacher’s guide; it is,
after all, less demanding than thinking.
But can such teachers liberate the
intellects of their students?

No, we must surely take a different
route. We must give as much choice to
teachers as we can, while building in
sufficient overall structure to avoid
confusion. There is not doubt that this
will cause anxiety but a certain element
of anxiety is intrinsic to learning.

Teachers who are making significant
choices about the materials and methods
which they use are likely to welcome the
opportunity to learn, with colleagues,
about the consequences of those choices.
They need to be able to share with
colleagues who are wrestling with the
same problems, the successes and failures
that they are having. The curriculum
needs to be something which is living
and growing and the methods need to
be things which are developed and
refined in the process of being used.
And administrators can help by building
a structure and a climate within which
teachers can be learners and choosers.

Roger Fisher, Harvard Law School professor and author of Getting to Yes,
generated tremendous excitement among more than 100 Principals’ Center
members this fall when he spoke on “The principal and principled
negotiation: Getting nasty or getting taken are not the only ways.”

Victor Atkins is principal of the Charles C.
Cashman Elementary School in Amesbury, Mass.