

CURRICULUM: WHOSE DECISION IS IT?

VIEWPOINTS OF THREE PRACTITIONERS



Harvard Principals'
Institute Newsletter
January 1983

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 Many teachers did their own thing; some clung to the outdated curriculum guides of the 1970s; some followed commercial textbooks; and a few schools and districts wrote their own curriculum objectives.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 reaching 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

continued page 6

Marshall *(continued)*

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.

Atkins *(continued)*

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 community 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 no 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.

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



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."