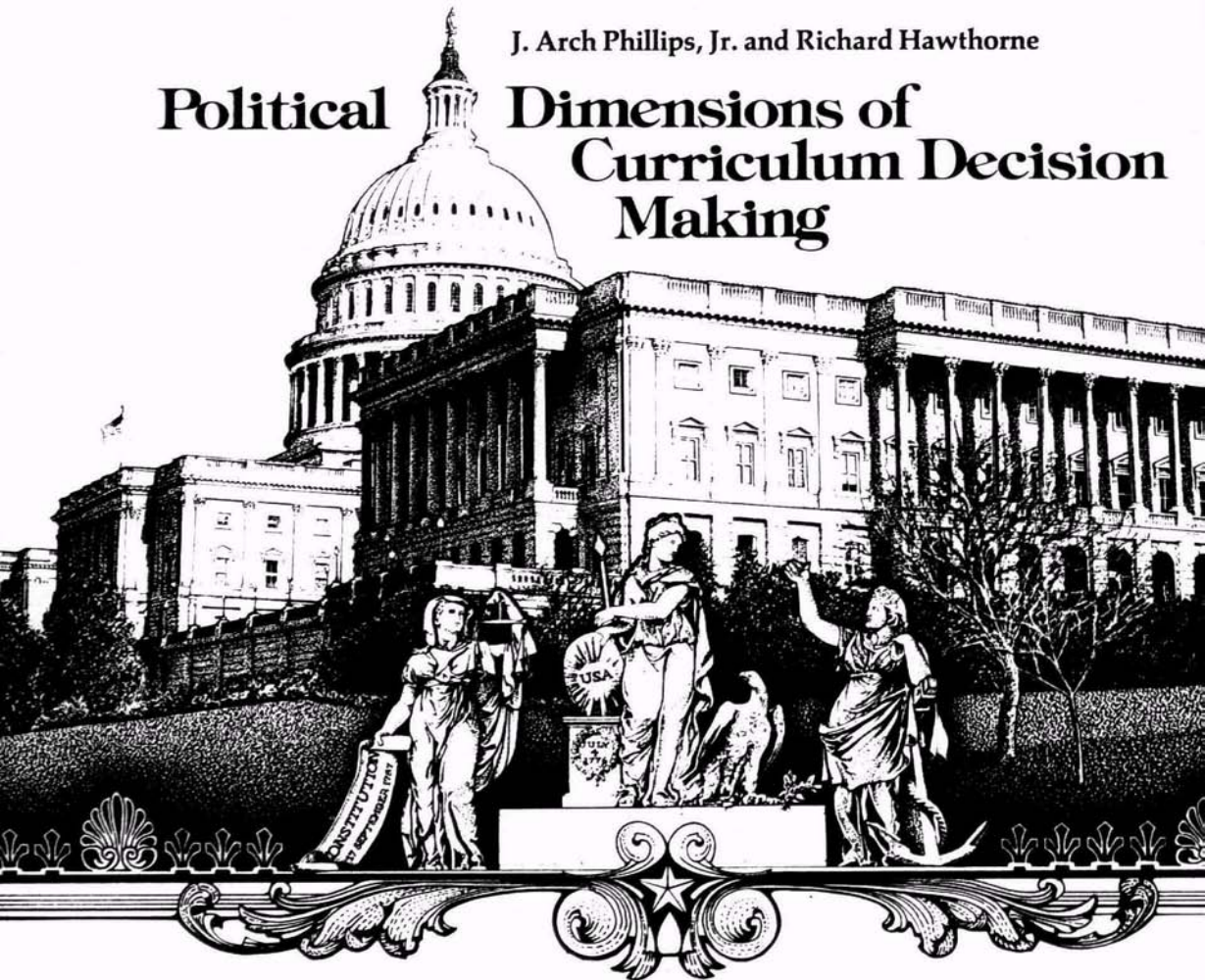


Political Dimensions of Curriculum Decision Making



"Curriculum design, development, and evaluation are, always have been, and always will be special cases of political behavior." These authors examine the implications of political realities as these affect curriculum decision making.

Curriculum decision making finds itself in transition between theories of well-controlled models of decision making and political realities imbedded in forces at national, state, and local levels. Curriculum design, development, and evaluation are, always have been, and always will be special cases of political behavior. By political behavior we mean activity directed toward influencing or controlling decisions about the allocation of values.¹

Deciding who should have access to what knowledge; how that knowledge is to be selected, organized, and presented; who should be evaluated about what and how . . . is clearly a process of allocating values. It is a political reality that some people have greater power than others in making curriculum decisions. It is also a political reality that more and more people are seeking greater involvement in curriculum matters. The importance of who is involved in shaping the curriculum is underscored by Schaffarzick *et al.* when they state, ". . . concern for who should make

¹ Jay D. Scribner and Richard M. Englert. "The Politics of Education: An Introduction." See: Jay D. Scribner, editor. *The Politics of Education*. 76th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 22.

curriculum decisions appears to take priority over the question 'what shall be taught?'²

• Who does influence the allocation of values that result in curricula?

• To what extent do local, state, and national sources influence or have control over curriculum matters?

• What characterizes the political activities of curriculum development at the local, state, and national levels?

• What are the points of demand and conflict in contemporary curriculum decision making?

These questions guide our examination of the locus of curriculum influence and control, the forms of political behavior engaged, and the points of conflict focused upon in curriculum decision making.

The Locus of Curriculum Control

Sorting out the quandary of federal vs. state vs. local influence is difficult at best. The interlocking relations are complex and frequently unclear. With respect to federal control, the issue is how much really exists, and just what is the nature of federal curriculum influence? Responses to this question are highly dependent on whom you ask about which programs or situations. Some observers have suggested that federal influence pervades virtually all facets and levels of the educational enterprise, creating *de facto* control of education at the state and local levels through the myriad of compliance regulations and conditions for receipt of aid.³

While on the one hand, strong federal legislation continues to encourage corrective and/or preventive programs that emerge in response to a need left unattended (purposely or unpurposely) by state/local decision makers and that are in the national interest (for example, N.S.F., N.D.E.A., Vocational Education, Mainstreaming, and so on), communities frequently perceive these actions as deliberate attempts to usurp the "grassroots" responsibility for educational decision making. Distinctions between federally funded program development and priority recommendations continue to be confused with state and local community rights and responsibilities for making rational

choices among alternatives. For another perspective on the curriculum priorities of a key federal educational agency, it is instructive to review the products of the NIE Curriculum Task Force.⁴

Clearly the federal government influences curriculum decision making, particularly in support of selected curriculum research and development efforts. To suggest that "they" control curriculum decision making at the state or local level is naive and ill-founded. Of perhaps greater power than the substantive focus of federal aid to curriculum decision making is the imposition of a way of thinking and talking about curriculum

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demanding of any persons who choose to avail themselves of federal dollars or to meet federal regulations. The specifications for grant proposals require a systems/technological rationality that forces an economic model on the curriculum developer/evaluator. The potential consequences of technological rationality have been set forth by Macdonald.⁵

With regard to state level of control and influence—the state still holds the ultimate obligatory responsibility for education of its children and youth. State control of curriculum decision making expresses itself in at least four ways:

² National Institute of Education Curriculum Task Force. *Current Issues, Problems and Concerns in Curriculum Development*. January 1976.

³ Joel Spring. *The Sorting Machine*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1976.

⁴ Harold L. Hodgkinson. *NIE's Role in Curriculum Development: Findings, Policy Options, and Recommendations*. National Council on Educational Research, February 1977.

⁵ James B. Macdonald. "A Curriculum Rationale." See: Edmund C. Short and George D. Marconnet, editors. *Contemporary Thought on Public School Curriculum*. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1969.

1. Legislative mandates that define certain areas to be included in the curriculum for a specified amount of time each day for 180+ days.

2. Statewide textbook adoption policies in several states.

3. State approval of school charters and inspection rights over the curriculum are a particularly powerful control as many alternative schools have discovered.

4. State certification of teachers, administrators, and supervisors by approval of college and university programs. (For example, the Ohio plan for the redesign of teacher certification programs requires that the curriculum of all state accredited programs include preparing *all* teachers to teach reading as it relates to their specialty.)⁶

Where they exist, state textbook adoptions are without a doubt a most pervasive force. All are not equally rigorous or controlling, however. In a recent action in Texas, an example of strong state adoption practices, the Dallas school board by a vote of six to three overrode the state adoption list in favor of a "creationist" series of biology texts, workbooks, and instructional manuals.⁷ This is one example of successful efforts on the part of local community pressures in opposition to state mandates.

In another state, a citizen's instructional materials review committee was formed at the behest of and including a "contemporary critic" of the schools through the president of the State Board of Education. Ground rules for the committee established at the request of the "critic" assured that only unanimously agreed on positions would be reported from the committee. No reports have been forthcoming. This is democracy and rational dialogue?

Not to be overlooked or underestimated as a force on curricular decision making is accountability legislation ranging from mandated reporting to citizens by each and every school district to a statewide standard high school exit examination as in Florida. Accountability legislation now exists in no fewer than 22 states. One characteristic of all these legislative actions is demand for improved performance in the so-called basic skills. The reality and threat of comparison of student performance data from class to class and school to school have created an atmosphere of unrest and mistrust among community, professional educators, and state legislatures. Some curriculum

leaders in Michigan, an early entrant into the movement, feel that the assessment program has caused inordinate attention to be directed toward reading and mathematics instruction, with a consequent neglect of other important areas of student learning.

Another form of accountability legislation has been proposed for Ohio to be administered to all pupils in grades three, six, nine, and eleven as prerequisites to promotion to the next grade level. Simultaneously, forces continue to press for adequate programs to meet individual differences and broad-ranging social/emotional development. The proposed Ohio legislation does not limit to, but explicitly requires, examinations in reading and computation.

At the local level, citizens continue to hold the belief that ultimate control over educational decision making rests with the community. Given this point of view, one would assume the appropriateness of *direct* community involvement in policy formulation and decision making. The fundamental question remains—whose values are to be incorporated into the scenarios of schooling for youth in a given community? Clearly, among the most difficult concepts to incorporate into the mentality of any community and specific interest groups therein, is that a *monolithic* curriculum cannot serve the needs of a *pluralistic* society. The challenge is to orchestrate divergent value positions into a functional paradigm for schooling incorporating alternative modes and programs.

All the while that local curriculum leaders, teachers, citizens, and lay leaders believe they are making the critical program decisions, they may well be living a myth. The recent NIE Report notes that . . . "publishers supply the great bulk of materials used in schools, and instructional materials, especially textbooks, structure most classroom activity." Further, it is estimated that "95 percent of all classroom time involves use of textbooks."⁸

⁶ State Board of Education. *Standards for Colleges or Universities Preparing Teachers*. Columbus, Ohio: Department of Education, 1975.

⁷ J. Claude Evans. "Creationism Controversy in Dallas." *The Christian Century*. March 1977. pp. 188-89.

⁸ Harold L. Hodgkinson. *NIE's Role in Curriculum Development: Findings, Policy Options, and Recommendations*. National Council on Educational Research, February 1977. p. 9.



Photo: William Tiernan, Charleston Daily Mail, West Virginia.

Ziegler and associates concluded "... that superintendents, in spite of the rhetoric, are the dominant actors in educational decision-making, and that their decisions are only occasionally made within the context of community participation through interest groups."⁹

It is at the local level that the microcosm of political behavior in curriculum decision-making becomes most revealing. It is here we can observe most clearly the patterns and permutations of political power and control in curriculum affairs. Our study of who is involved at the district level and to what extent they are involved in the process, while of insufficient *breadth* to allow generalization, has yielded some insights.

One hundred seventy-five teachers and administrators in Northeast Ohio were asked whom

they perceived as being involved and to what extent in selecting and organizing objectives, selecting textbooks, selecting and organizing content, and similar curriculum decisions. The findings so far show that:

1. Students are not involved at all.
2. Parents, individually or collectively, are rarely involved and when involved serve in an advisory capacity only.
3. Teachers, individually or collectively, tend to be involved in advising and deliberating, but rarely in making the decisions.
4. Principals and central office personnel are reported to be most active as deliberators and decision makers.
5. The superintendent and board of education are rarely sources of advice, seldom become *apparent* in the deliberations, but do decide and/or approve curriculum decisions.

Who influences curriculum decision making? Nearly any organization, at any level, that has a concern. Who controls curriculum decision making? No one.

Tactics and Techniques of Curriculum Control (The Contemporary Ax-Grinders)

The forces opposing contemporary curriculum practices are, for the most part, "externals" who are extraordinarily well organized. These pressure groups are, in most cases, small. They articulate in a straightforward manner their stated beliefs, give the appearance of having a well-ordered rationale, are willing to take risks, and have economic resources. In fact, tracing the patterns of networks of organized resistance is revealing and enlightening. Not infrequently, patterns of generating activity and controversy follow the classic lines reported by Mary Anne Raywid in the *Ax-Grinders*.¹⁰ Attacks are

⁹ Harmon Zeigler, Harvey J. Tucker and L. A. Wilson, II. "Communication and Decision Making in American Public Education: A Longitudinal and Comparative Study." See: Jay D. Scribner, editor. *The Politics of Education*. 76th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 223.

¹⁰ Mary Anne Raywid. *The Ax-Grinders*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1962.

mounted against isolated specific textbooks, films, or programs, for example, as a way ultimately to meet a different agenda.

Current critics of curriculum are quite adept at hitting at value positions held by the majority (both lay and professional) and demonstrating adverse relationships between programs and those values. Why cannot schools successfully counter-veil the arguments? How does a vocal minority overwhelm a silent majority?

For reasons not readily verifiable, it appears that constituents of organized opposition groups wishing to specifically prod schools and press for a conservative viewpoint will decline opportunities to officially participate as lay members of textbook review and curriculum committees. The litany of curricular issues that tend to attract demands and foster conflict from external sources are well known: sex education, values clarification, evolution, the basics, accountability, racism, sexism, grading, and patriotism.

Some Final Observations

We have touched on several aspects of political behavior and curriculum decision making that appear to exist in contemporary America.

1. We know far too little about the politics of curriculum. Political behavior is a necessary part of curriculum decision making. Attitudes of smugness or disdain toward the political is not only naive, it is foolhardy.

2. Federal interventions in curriculum stem from concerns for the national interest and tend to focus on those problems not adequately addressed by state or local curriculum decision makers.

3. Textbook publishers will respond to their clients—their power and economic survival rests with their ability to read the market.

4. External forces of greatest impact have targeted on basic cultural values in a highly organized manner. Internal decision makers seem to be ill-prepared to either anticipate reactions or posit new directions.

5. Policy formulation, function, and utilization are not well understood by school boards, central offices, or school district constituencies.

6. Distinctions between deliberating, decid-

ing, and approving in relation to roles and responsibilities need to be better understood.

7. Reality is that locally held values will and must prevail.

8. Needs of varying groups and individuals to be heard and to participate in curriculum decisions tend to bring together unpredictable and unintended alliances.

9. External pressure groups are skillful at analyzing internal "soft spots" and will gain inroads through successful power plays, particularly when decision makers do not have conceptual control of their own curriculum affairs.

10. While the current scene suggests ambivalence and broad-ranging differences across the states, response to diverse pressures and forces will undoubtedly produce more sterile and stereotypic curricula unless all facets of the community (local through national levels) can be brought together to shape creative alternatives. Curriculum cannot tolerate "us-them" dichotomies.

It will no longer do for ". . . the educational system to function as a closed one in which the professional bureaucracy optimizes its power and consequently minimizes citizens' action."¹¹ [L]

¹¹ Jay D. Scribner and Richard M. Englert. "The Politics of Education: An Introduction." See: Jay D. Scribner, editor. *The Politics of Education*. 76th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977. p. 15.



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