

CHANGING CURRICULAR HORSES IN MID-STREAM: SOMETIMES THE RIVER REQUIRES IT*

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The term “curriculum” is a word that American educators use almost every work-day. This is understandable, because that label describes the stuff we want our students to learn. Although oft-uttered, however, what a “curriculum” contains has historically had far less impact on instructional practice than is widely thought.

But curriculum’s modest influence on instruction has been dramatically transformed in the past few years, especially with respect to state-sanctioned curricula. What’s represented by a state’s curricular aims these days can have a decisive impact—either positive or negative—on the way students are taught. Let’s see why it is that “curriculum” has suddenly become a meaningful force in the way our students are taught.

A Personal Perspective

During my own five-decade career in education, I’ve bumped up against curriculum in all sorts of settings. Drawing on those bump-induced bruises, until very recently I have believed that, with precious few exceptions, what was “in” the curriculum made little practical difference in the day-to-day activities of schooling.

I should indicate, early on, that I am employing the term *curriculum* in its traditional usage, namely, to describe the knowledge, skills, and (sometimes) affect that educators want their students to acquire. This time-honored definition, therefore, indicates that a curriculum represents educational *ends*. It is hoped by educators, of course, that such ends will be attained as a consequence of instructional activities. Those instructional activities, then, serve as the *means* of promoting the curricular ends we seek.

In the past, the curricular things we wanted our students to learn were typically described as *goals* or *objectives*. These days, however, most educators tend to use the term *content standards* to describe their curricular aims. Irrespective of the label that’s used, however, what’s in a curriculum is supposed to describe the intended impact of an educational enterprise on the students being taught.

My first serious brush with curriculum occurred when I began my initial job as a high-school teacher in eastern Oregon. (This event transpired so long ago, my friends

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opine, that Oregon had probably just emerged from its territorial status.) Well, even way back then, Oregon had a state-approved curriculum syllabus, and I had been given a copy of that thick booklet for my bookshelf. But that's where it stayed—right on that bookshelf. Other than glancing at the syllabus for an hour or so, prior to the school year's start so I could see what the state-decreed goals were for the courses I was scheduled to teach, I never looked at the state curriculum syllabus again.

What determined the content I taught in my classes was, almost totally, the *textbook* I was using. As a first-year teacher in a small high school, I had five different preparations. Accordingly, my frantic instructional-planning universe revolved completely around the textbooks I'd been told to use for those five courses. To illustrate, I was required, by a principal who had never heard of "highly qualified teachers," to teach a course in geography even though I had never in my entire life taken a course in geography. Given my lack of geographic expertise, I truly cherished the large red geography textbook without which I could not have survived a class of 30 sophomores, most of whom did not truly care about the location of Khartoum or the subtleties of a Mercator map projection.

But I was not alone. All of the other teachers in my school paid little, if any, attention to the state curriculum syllabus. My faculty colleagues, too, decided on what they should teach according to what was treated in their textbooks. In retrospect, "alignment" in those days might have referred to whether a teacher's lesson plan meshed suitably with the textbook's upcoming chapter.

No Clarity, No Consequences

The trifling impact of official curricular documents on teachers' instructional practices can probably be attributed, at least in part, to the excessive generality with which curricular aims are often set forth. If, for example, social studies teachers discover that their students are supposed to acquire "a meaningful understanding of how our nation's government functions," there is obviously so much latitude in this sort of curricular aim that a wide range of instructional activities could legitimately be regarded as germane. The mushiness of many curricular aims certainly plays a role in reducing the impact of those aims on classroom instruction.

However, a more fundamental reason that our nation's curricula have had so little influence on instructional practice is that what was in a curriculum, even a state-sanctioned or district-sanctioned curriculum, *rarely made any sort of difference to anyone*.

Oh, certainly, there have been occasional instances when particular body of content was thought to be appropriate or inappropriate for a state curriculum. Most of us recall, for instance, the relatively recent curricular flap in Kansas about the inclusion of *evolution* content in the state's science curriculum. And, when a state's textbooks are under consideration for adoption, those doing the adopting surely pay some attention to what's in the state's curriculum when they review contending textbooks. But,

considering the full-blown panorama of American public education, what has been identified in official curriculum documents has typically had only a slight impact on what actually goes on in classrooms.

Difference-Making Legislation

But that situation came to a screeching halt on January 8, 2002 when President George W. Bush affixed his signature to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This important reauthorization of a federal law, first enacted in 1965, substantially altered the relationship between curriculum and instruction in America. That's because NCLB first tied *assessments* to a state's curriculum, then tied important decisions to students' performances on those curriculum-based assessments. If students failed to make sufficient progress in their *assessed* mastery of a state's curricular aims, then all sorts of sanctions and public embarrassment would follow for educators who were running the schools and districts where insufficient progress had been seen. Because NCLB *required* a state's annual assessments to be based on a state's official curriculum, and because those annual assessments could raise all sorts of hob, what was in the curriculum suddenly mattered.

A state's educators, of course, were eager to avoid NCLB sanctions (or NCLB-induced embarrassment) by having been identified as failing to make adequate yearly progress in students' test performances. Accordingly, those educators became far more attentive to what was going to be covered in their state's NCLB tests. But a state's NCLB tests, as required by law, must be based on the state's official curriculum represented by a state's "challenging" content standards.

So, let me quickly tie a ribbon around this logic chain: (1) a state's schools and districts can get battered by NCLB sanctions and/or public embarrassment if students don't score well enough on the state's annual NCLB tests; (2) but what's measured on those annual NCLB tests must be based on a state's official curriculum; and, therefore, (3) teachers will be certain to try to boost NCLB test scores by devoting substantial instructional time to what's likely to be assessed by their state's curriculum-based NCLB tests. So, for the first time in the history of American public schooling, a potent federal law has made curriculum truly count—big time.

The problem is that most state curricula, against a backdrop of these significant NCLB pressures to improve test scores, are actually *lowering* the quality of education in a state's schools. We need to understand why that is so. And we need to do something about it.

The Problem

Here, in a nutshell, is what currently constitutes an NCLB-triggered curriculum-caused calamity. The content standards now found in almost all of our states were originally devised by competent, well-intentioned individuals—but at a time when a state-approved curriculum was merely supposed to reflect worthwhile educational

aspirations for a state's students. In most states' current collections of content standards, unfortunately, there are far too many curricular aims to teach or to test in the time available for either teaching or for testing. Almost all states' content standards reflect a "wish-list" mentality whereby the determiners of a state's content standards in, say, mathematics, end up listing all the nifty mathematical skills and knowledge they *wish* the state's students would be able to master. But the result of these sorts of cover-the-waterfront curriculum exercises—carried out before NCLB's arrival made curriculum a potent factor in a state's accountability game—was invariably to lay out way too many curricular targets.

A state's educators, therefore, have been forced to deal with—or try to deal with—an excessive number of curricular targets. There are too many curricular aims to be assessed by a given year's NCLB tests, of course, so teachers are obliged to *guess* regarding which of the state's myriad curricular aims will actually be tested in a given year. On probability grounds alone, of course, many teachers turn out to guess wrong. Teachers often end up (1) teaching things that aren't on the NCLB tests and/or (2) not teaching things that actually are NCLB-tested.

Beyond this important drawback of teachers' off-line classroom instruction, there's a related non-trivial instructional problem. This difficulty arises because teachers are unable to learn—from the results of NCLB tests—which of their instructional activities have or haven't worked. Because there are so many curricular aims to be assessed, those aims that do turn out to be measured on a given year's test can't be tested with enough items to supply any sort of sensible estimate to teachers about which of the measured curricular aims were or weren't well taught. A collection of too-general score reports simply doesn't provide teachers with the information they need to improve their instruction, for those reports do not let teachers know *which* curricular aims have/haven't been mastered by a teacher's students. And, lurking as the culprit in this sort of instructionally meaningless score-reporting is a state curriculum containing too many curricular aims.

Given this regrettable situation, is it any wonder that some NCLB-pressured teachers engage in rampant curricular reductionism whereby they excise from their instructional activities any sort of content—even important content—if that content seems unlikely to be tested? Given this regrettable situation, is it any wonder that some NCLB-pressured teachers oblige their students to take part in endless, mind-numbing test-preparation sessions? Given this regrettable situation, is it any wonder that some NCLB-pressured teachers engage in such dishonest practices as supplying their students with advance copies of covertly copied items from the actual tests?

All of these bad things can be reduced or eliminated if only more sensible NCLB tests were employed. But, as you have now seen, *first* we must grapple with the inappropriate curricular targets found in so many of our states. Unless a state's decision-makers figure out a way to have their state's NCLB tests function as a force for instructional improvement, not instructional decline, too many students will suffer. That suffering can be traced directly to curricular aims that, though perhaps serviceable in a

former time, just don't work today. These days, because of NCLB, a curriculum *does* make a difference. These days, because of NCLB, we need to re-think whether our state curricula are suitable.

Three Amelioration Options

The task before a state's educational policymakers is to reduce the number of eligible-to-be-assessed curricular aims so that (1) a state's teachers are not overwhelmed by too many instructional targets and (2) a student's mastery of each curricular aim that's assessed can be determined with reasonable accuracy. Teachers who can focus their instructional attention on a modest number of truly significant skills will usually be able to get their students master those skills—even if such skills are genuinely “challenging.” Accurate reports of students' per-skill mastery will permit students and students' parents to know which curricular aims have/haven't been mastered—and teachers can determine which curricular aims have/haven't been well taught. Three potential ways of coping with this curricular crisis will now be briefly described. Thereafter, one of the three options will be advocated.

Brand new content standards. The first option involves a start-from-scratch approach to the identification of a state's curricular aims. Given a clean slate, and the recognition that the most important of a subject matter's curricular aims must be assessed by NCLB tests, a state's curriculum-makers could attempt to come up with a markedly winnowed, more instructionally beneficial set of unarguably significant curricular aims.

Coalesced content standards. A second alternative would be for a state's curriculum officials to re-work the state's existing curricular aims so that the most important of those aims were subsumed under a smaller number of reconceptualized, albeit measurable targets. Although, in many ways, this approach is similar to the first “brand-new” curriculum option, this second option might represent a modest re-packaging of a state's extant curricular aims without a complete start-again approach to curriculum-building.

Derivative assessment-frameworks. The final option is to leave the state's current content standards untouched, but derive from those standards a framework for NCLB assessment that focuses on a small enough number of reconceptualized, eligible-to-be-taught curricular targets so that the state's curriculum-based NCLB tests are likely to have a beneficial rather than harmful impact on education. The skills and bodies of knowledge identified in an NCLB assessment-framework would, of course, be influential on a state's instructional practices—hence would need to be chosen with consummate care.

My recommendation. Because the first two options are both likely to involve substantial time-consuming and resource-consuming activities, I find myself persuaded that option three is the most sensible way to proceed. Indeed, in many states the existing content standards have already been approved by a state school board or,

sometimes, by the legislature itself—usually after substantial input from the state’s educators and citizens. I prefer to leave those extant content standards as they are—untouched. If the content standards are truly exerting much of a positive influence on schooling (which I doubt), then that positive influence should continue. If the content standards really aren’t a positive factor anyway, then letting them languish will be just fine.

However, because NCLB requires a state’s NCLB tests to be clearly based on the state’s content standards, it would be imperative to build a defensible case for federal officials that describes both the framework-derivation process and the relevant stakeholders involved. It is important that the state’s NCLB assessment targets be *demonstrably* derivative from a state’s existing curricular aims.

A Final Plea

The need to deal with our current state-approved curricular aims is, in my view, imperative. The longer we delay in coming up with educationally sound curriculum-derived NCLB tests, the more children there will be who receive a less than lustrous education because their teachers are being driven by ill-conceived, curriculum-based NCLB assessments into shabby instructional practices.

Sure, I know that many states have invested dollars galore in the creation of customized state-based tests that have supposedly been “aligned” to their states’ official curricula. And, of course, it would be costly to move toward different tests. But those existing curricular-aligned tests were developed at a time when a state’s curriculum exercised its historical absence of impact on classroom instruction. Those times have changed. And that’s because, unless NCLB is seriously altered or disappears altogether, today’s state curricula do make a difference. It’s time to fix them.