The Chronic Failure

Of Curriculum Reform

By David F. Labaree

One thing we have learned from examining the

history of curriculum in the 20th century is that

curriculum reform has had remarkably little

effect on the character of teaching and learning

in American classrooms. As the century draws

to a close, it seems like a good time to think

about why this has been the case.

The failure of curriculum reform was certainly not

the result of a lack of effort. At various times during

the last 100 years, reformers have: issued

high-visibility reports proposing dramatic changes in the curriculum (Cardinal

Principles of Secondary Education in 1918, A Nation at Risk in 1983);

created whole new subject areas (social studies, vocational education, special

education); sought to reorganize the curriculum around a variety of new

principles (ability grouping, the project method, life adjustment, back to basics,

inclusion, critical thinking); and launched movements to reinvent particular

subjects ("New Math," National Council of Teachers of Mathematics math,

phonics, whole language).

In spite of all these reform efforts, the basic character of the curriculum that is

practiced in American classrooms is strikingly similar to the form that

predominated in the early part of the century. As before, the curriculum

continues to revolve around traditional academic subjects--which we cut off

from practical everyday knowledge, teach in relative isolation from one

another, differentiate by ability, sequence by age, ground in textbooks, and

deliver in a teacher-centered classroom. So much effort and so little result.

How can we understand this problem? For starters, we can recognize that

curriculum means different things at different levels in the educational system,

and that curriculum reform has had the greatest impact at the level most remote

from teaching and learning in the classroom. Starting at the top of the system

and moving toward the bottom, there is the rhetorical curriculum (ideas put

forward by educational leaders, policymakers, and professors about what

curriculum should be, as embodied in reports, speeches, and college texts), the

formal curriculum (written curriculum policies put in place by school districts

and embodied in curriculum guides and textbooks), the curriculum-in-use (the

content that teachers actually teach in individual classrooms), and the received

curriculum (the content that students actually learn in these classrooms).

Each wave of reform dramatically transforms the rhetorical curriculum, by

changing the way educational leaders talk about the subject. This gives the

feeling that something is really happening, but most often it's not. Sometimes

the reform moves beyond this stage and begins to shape the formal curriculum,

getting translated into district-level curriculum frameworks and the textbooks

approved for classroom use. Yet this degree of penetration does not guarantee

that reform ideas will have an observable effect on the curriculum-in-use. More

often than not, teachers respond to reform rhetoric and local curriculum

mandates by making only marginal changes in the way they teach subjects.

They may come to talk about their practice using the new reform language, but

only rarely do they make dramatic changes in their own curriculum practice.

And even the rare cases when teachers bring their teaching in line with

curriculum reform do not necessarily produce a substantial change in the

received curriculum. What students learn is frequently quite different from what

the reformers intended. For as curriculum-reform initiatives trickle down from

the top to the bottom of the educational system, their power and coherence

dissipate, with the result that student learning is likely to show few signs of the

outcomes promoted by the original reform rhetoric. As David B. Tyack and

Larry Cuban show in their book Tinkering Toward Utopia, the dominant

pattern is one of recurring waves of reform rhetoric combined with glacial

change in educational practice.

Why has this pattern persisted for so long? Consider a few enduring

characteristics of American education that have undermined the impact of

curriculum reform on teaching and learning.

Conflicting Goals: One factor is conflict over the goals of education itself.

Different curriculum reforms embody different goals. Some promote

democratic equality, by seeking to provide all children with the skills and

knowledge they will need to function as competent citizens. Others promote

social efficiency, by seeking to provide different groups of children with the

specific skills they need in order to be productive in the different kinds of jobs

required in a complex economy. Still others promote social mobility, by

providing individual students with educational advantages in the competition for

the best social positions. One result is that reform efforts over time produce a

pendulum swing between alternative conceptions of what children need to

learn, leading to a sense that reform is both chronic ("steady work," as Richard

Elmore and Milbrey McLaughlin put it) and cyclical (the here-we-go-again

phenomenon). Another result is the compromise structure of the curriculum

itself, which embodies contradictory purposes and therefore is unable to

accomplish any one of these purposes with any degree of effectiveness (the

familiar sense of schools as trying to do too much while accomplishing too

little).

Credentialing Over Learning: From the perspective of the social-mobility

goal, the point of education is not to learn the curriculum but to accumulate the

grades, credits, and degrees that provide an edge in competing for jobs. So

when this goal begins to play an increasingly dominant role in shaping

education--which has been the case during the 20th century in the United

States--curriculum reforms come to focus more on sorting and selecting

students and less on enhancing learning, more on form than substance. This

turns curriculum into a set of labels for differentiating students rather than a

body of knowledge that all children should be expected to master, and it erects

a significant barrier to any curriculum reforms that take learning seriously.

A Curriculum That Works: Another factor that undermines efforts to reform

the curriculum is the comfortable sense among influential people that the current

course of study in schools works reasonably well. Middle- and

upper-middle-class families have little reason to complain. After graduation,

their children for the most part go on to find attractive jobs and live

comfortable lives. Judging from these results, schools must be providing these

students with an adequate fund of knowledge and skills, so they have little

reason to push for curriculum reform as a top priority. In fact, such changes

may pose a threat to the social success of these children by changing the rules

of the game--introducing learning criteria that they may not be able to meet

(such as through performance testing), or eliminating curriculum options that

provide special advantage (such as the gifted program). Meanwhile, families at

the lower end of the social-class system, who have less reason to be happy

about the social consequences of schooling, are not in a powerful position to

push for reform.

Preserving the Curriculum of a Real School: Curriculum reform can spur

significant opposition from people at all levels of society if it appears to change

one of the fundamental characteristics of what Mary Metz calls "real school."

Since all of us have extensive experience as students in school, we all have a

strong sense of what makes up a school curriculum. To a significant extent, this

curriculum is made up of the elements I mentioned earlier: academic subjects,

which are cut off from practical everyday knowledge, taught in relative isolation

from one another, stratified by ability, sequenced by age, grounded in

textbooks, and delivered in a teacher-centered classroom. If this is our sense

of what curriculum is like in a real school, then we are likely to object to any

reforms that make substantial changes in any of these defining elements. This

shared cultural understanding of the school curriculum exerts a profoundly

conservative influence, by blocking program innovations even if they enhance

learning and by providing legitimacy for programs that fit the traditional model

even if they deter learning.

Preserving Real Teaching: This conservative view of the curriculum is also

frequently shared by teachers. Prospective teachers spend an extended

"apprenticeship of observation" (in Dan Lortie's phrase) as students in the

K-12 classroom, during which they observe teaching from the little seats and

become imprinted with a detailed picture of what the teacher's

curriculum-in-use looks like. They can't see the reasons that motivate the

teacher's curriculum choices. All they can see is the process, the routines, the

forms. So it is not surprising that they bring to their own teaching a sense of

curriculum that is defined by textbooks, disconnected categories of knowledge,

and academic exercises. Teacher-preparation programs often try to offset the

legacy of this apprenticeship by promoting the latest in curriculum-reform

perspectives, but they are up against a massive accumulation of experience and

sense impression that works to preserve the traditional curriculum.

Organizational Convenience: The traditional curriculum also persists in the

face of curriculum-reform efforts because this curriculum is organizationally

convenient for both teachers and administrators. It is convenient to focus on

academic subjects, which are aligned with university disciplines, thus simplifying

teacher preparation. It is convenient to have a curriculum that is differentiated,

which allows teachers to specialize. It is convenient to stratify studies by ability

and age, which facilitates classroom management by allowing teachers to teach

to the whole class at one level rather than adapt the curriculum to the individual

needs of learners. It is convenient to ground teaching in textbooks, which

reduce the demands on teacher expertise while also reducing the time

commitment required for a teacher to develop her own curriculum materials.

And it is convenient to run a teacher-centered classroom, which reinforces the

teacher's control and which also simplifies curriculum planning and student

monitoring. Curriculum-reform efforts are hard to sell and even more difficult to

sustain if they can only succeed if teachers have special capacities, such as:

extraordinary subject-matter expertise; the time, will, and skill required to

develop their own curriculum materials; the ability to teach widely divergent

students effectively; and the ability to maintain control over these students while

allowing them freedom to learn on their own.

Loose Coupling of School Systems: Another factor that undercuts the

effectiveness of curriculum reform is the loosely coupled nature of American

school systems. School administrators exert a lot of control over such matters

as personnel, budgets, schedules, and supplies, but they have remarkably little

control over the actual process of instruction. In part, this is because teaching

takes place behind closed doors, which means that only individual teachers

really know the exact nature of the curriculum-in-use in their own classrooms.

But in part, this is because administrators have little power to make teachers

toe the line instructionally. Most managers can influence employee performance

on the job by manipulating traditional mechanisms of fear and greed: Cross me

and you're fired; do the job the way I want, and I'll offer you a promotion and

a pay increase. School administrators can fire teachers only with the greatest

difficulty, and pay levels are based on years of service and graduate credits,

not job performance. The result is that teachers have considerably more

autonomy in the way they perform their fundamental functions than do most

employees. And this autonomy makes it hard for administrators to ensure that

the formal curriculum becomes the curriculum-in-use in district classrooms.

Adaptability of the School System: Curriculum reform is also difficult to

bring about because of another organizational characteristic of the American

educational system: its adaptability. As Philip Cusick has shown, the system

has a genius for incorporating curriculum change without fundamental

reorganization. This happens in two related ways--formalism and segmentation.

One is the way that teachers adopt the language and the feel of a reform effort

without altering the basic way they do things.

The system is flexible about adopting curriculum

forms as long as this doesn't challenge the basic

structure of curriculum practice. The other way is

inherent in the segmented structure of the school

curriculum. The differentiation of subjects frees

schools to adopt new programs and courses by the

simple process of addition. They can always tack on another segment in the

already fragmented curriculum, because these additions require no fundamental

restructuring of programs. For this reason, schools are quite tolerant of

programs and courses that have contradictory goals. Live and let live is the

motto. By abandoning any commitment to coherence of curriculum and

compatibility of purpose, schools are able to incorporate new initiatives without

forcing collateral changes. The result is that schools appear open to reform

while effectively resisting real change.

Weak Link Between Teaching and Learning: Finally, let me return to the

problem that faces any curriculum-reform effort in the last analysis, and that is

trying to line up the received curriculum with the curriculum-in-use. The

problem we confront here is the irreducible weakness of the link between

teaching and learning. Even if teachers, against considerable odds, were to

transform the curriculum they use in their classrooms to bring it in line with a

reform effort, there is little to reassure us that the students in these classes

would learn what the reform curriculum was supposed to convey. Students,

after all, are willful actors who learn only what they choose to learn. Teachers

can't make learning happen; they can only create circumstances that are

conducive to learning. Students may indeed choose to learn what is taught,

they may also choose to learn something quite different, or they may decide to

resist learning altogether. And their willingness to cooperate in the learning

process is complicated further by the fact that they are present in the classroom

under duress. The law says they have to attend school until they are 16 years

old; the job market pressures them to stay in school even longer than that. But

these forces guarantee only attendance, not engagement in the learning

process. So this last crucial step in the chain of curriculum reform may be the

most difficult one to accomplish in a reliable and predictable manner, since

curriculum reform means nothing unless learning undergoes reform as well.

For all the reasons spelled out here, curriculum-reform movements over the

course of the 20th century have produced a lot of activity but not very much

real change in the curriculum that teachers use in classrooms or in the learning

that students accomplish in these classrooms. But isn't there reason to think

that the situation I have described is now undergoing fundamental change? That

real curriculum reform may now be on the horizon?

We currently have a substantial movement to set firm curriculum standards,

one that is coming at us from all sides. Presidents Bush and Clinton have

pushed in this direction; state departments of education are establishing

curriculum frameworks for all the districts under their jurisdiction; and

individual subject-matter groups have been working out their own sets of

standards. This is something new in American educational history. And

combined with the standards movement is a movement for systematic testing of

what students know--particularly at the state level, but also at the local and

federal levels. If in fact we are moving in the direction of a system in which

high-stakes tests determine whether students have learned the material required

by curriculum standards, this could bring about a more profound level of

curriculum reform than we have ever before experienced. Isn't that right?

Not necessarily. The move toward standards and testing would affect only one

or two elements in the long list of factors that impede curriculum reform. If this

movement is successful--which is a big if--it would indeed help tighten the links

in a system of education that has long been loosely coupled. It might also have

an impact on the problem of student motivation, by convincing at least some

students (those who see the potential occupational benefit of education) that

they need to study the curriculum in order to graduate and get a good job. But

this movement has already run into substantial resistance from religious

conservatives and supporters of school choice, and it goes against the grain of

the deep-seated American tradition of local control of education. In addition, I

don't see how it would have a serious impact on any of the other factors that

have for so long deflected efforts to reform the curriculum. Conflicting goals,

the power of credentialing over learning, keeping a system that works,

preserving the curriculum of the real school, organizational convenience, and

system adaptability--all of these elements would be largely unaffected by the

current initiatives for standards and testing.

The history of reform during the 20th century thus leaves us with a sobering

conclusion: The American educational system seems likely to continue resisting

efforts to transform the curriculum.

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