

## CURRICULUM PLANNING AND THE SMALL HIGH SCHOOL

by Anna Lee Stensland,  
University of Minnesota - Duluth

### I.

The prevention of stagnation, fragmentation, and generally poor teaching in our Minnesota high schools is dependent upon active curriculum planning and evaluation. An isolated teacher, absorbed in his own course with no knowledge of what his students experienced before they came to him and no concern about what comes afterwards, is a poor teacher, no matter how intelligent or talented he may be. The school without some plan or guide to place in the hands of the new teacher is negligent in its obligation to that teacher. But the individual who suffers most in such a situation is the student. He is confused by concepts for which he has no background, he wastes his time by having to repeat material he has already learned, such as grammar lessons he repeats every year of his high school career.

Under the tutelage of psychologists like Jerome Bruner, English teachers have been urged to sit down with scholars in the field to determine the sequence and structure of literature, composition, and language. The theory is that the child in learning a subject should do at a different level the same things which the scholar does at his level. Another argument for sequence is the need to see relationships. If a child is taught pieces and parts of information without seeing connections, he more easily forgets what he has learned.

It is the school involved in the ferment of curriculum experimentation which is alive. James Squire, in discussing the National Study of High School English Programs, observed that it is a special concern in curriculum in a high school -- a Great Books program, a humanities program or the spiral curriculum for example -- which seems to distinguish the vital faculty from the static one.<sup>1</sup>

### II.

But what of the curriculum work in the small high school in Minnesota, the school with 500 or fewer students and a comparably small faculty?

In the spring of 1966 the writer mailed questionnaires to 233 senior high schools in the state. The choice of schools was an unsophisticated one: every other senior high school in the Minnesota Educational Directory. Names of English teachers were furnished by the office of the Language Arts Consultant in the

Minnesota State Department of Education. Since there appeared to be no way of identifying the grade level of the classes the teachers taught in the schools, the name of the teacher receiving the questionnaire was chosen at random. The questionnaire had two main purposes: (1) to discover something about the English department and the teachers in it, and (2) to learn something about the literature program. This article is concerned with the first purpose, especially the information on those questionnaires from schools under 500 students.

Of the original 233 questionnaires, 125 were returned which contained answers complete enough to be used. Of the 125, there were 73 from schools reporting fewer than 500 students, 37 from schools between 500 and 1000, 9 from schools between 1000 and 1500, 3 from schools between 1500 and 2000, and 3 from schools over 2000. It is mainly with the 73 questionnaires from schools under 500 that this report deals.<sup>2</sup> The other 52 are considered as a group occasionally for comparison. There is no assumption that these particular small schools are necessarily typical of all small schools in Minnesota, but it is quite likely that if problems are pronounced in these 73 schools, they probably also exist in some of the other schools of the same size.

### III.

The first obstacle which these 73 small schools face in planning curriculum is a very limited number of full-time teachers. Four schools, in fact, report no full-time English teacher on the staff. Serious curriculum work, it would seem, requires at least one teacher who can give his full time and energy to the field. Considering the new materials in linguistics, rhetoric, reading, and literature, how can one adequately direct curriculum planning and teach full time if his interests and concerns are divided? One wonders whether the school which cannot afford at least one full-time English teacher is not too small to exist. The position of the fifteen teachers who find themselves the only full-time English teacher in their schools must also be a lonely one when they attempt the sort of soul-searching which is necessary for curriculum evaluation.

The contributions of the part-time English teacher can be most valuable, but his interest and time are naturally divided, and in many of these small schools they are divided three ways. Two English teachers, for example, report also teaching mathematics and serving as their school's principal. Teaching English, serving as the school librarian, and directing the school's forensics and drama program is an all too common division of energies. The problem of part-time teachers, however, cannot be considered one exclusively confined to the small school. One school of 500 to 1000 enrollment reported one full-time English teacher and seven part-time English teachers. But, in general, the larger schools have more full-time teachers.

A further obstacle to curriculum planning in these small schools is either the complete absence of a chairman or the feeling of the chairman that his position is so unofficial that it carries little responsibility and no authority. James Squire describes the department chairman's job in a good high school as that of "providing vigorous, intellectual leadership -- stimulating ideas, organizing for curriculum development, conferring with teachers, visiting classes, opening classrooms to visitation among teachers, assisting in placement and evaluation, of not as is often found, merely servicing the department in a most passive sense -- distributing books, passing out papers, filling out forms."<sup>3</sup> Of these 73 schools, 29 have no designated chairman and eleven teachers note that the chairmanship in their school is unofficial or has been assumed by a conscientious teacher. Such remarks as "I get the mail"; "it is only a convenience"; "it is assumed"; or "probably the only full-time teacher" appeared all too often. In comparison, among the 52 schools of over 500 enrollment 38 reported department chairmen, twelve reported no chairman and two reported that the chairmanship is "in name only" or "falls to the senior English teacher."

The 30 schools which have an appointed chairman do hold more meetings of the department than those without a chairman or with an unofficial or assumed chairmanship. Those with a chairman are also more likely to be involved in some sort of curriculum planning. Too large a number of those with a chairman, however, are doing no planning, in a few cases because a curriculum has recently been adopted, but in some cases for other reasons: "We tried but found it almost impossible to make this guide from 'scratch'"; "We planned with the State department but no changes have been made."

An overwhelming number of these small schools (50 of 73) report that they have no curriculum guide or course outline of any kind. A couple of schools report following the 1956 state department guide. By contrast, among the 52 schools over 500 enrollment, 27 schools or one half report that they have some kind of printed curriculum (dittoed, mimeographed, or commercially printed) to place in the hands of their teachers, twenty-three report no curriculum, and two report using the state guide. Also one-half of these larger schools, 26, report that their departments are involved in some sort of curriculum work, while 26 reported no such work in progress.

Thirty-two of the respondents from these 73 schools are department chairmen, either officially or unofficially. An encouraging note is that the majority of these chairmen do have English majors. A rather surprising discovery, however, is that so many of them have fewer than five years of experience. Four of them, in fact, are in their second year of teaching.

All of the department chairmen have far too many obligations. The number of students and classes must be considered in con-

junction with other responsibilities. Two of the department chairmen who have only three classes are also their school's librarian, a third has some elementary school music, speech, the class play and two study halls and the fourth is the high school principal, in addition to teaching two math classes. An English department chairman who teaches only one English class (English 12), and two math classes plus being the high school principal is indeed in a questionable situation. Department chairmen who have four classes listed such added duties as "all extra-curricular speech activities, two class plays" or "study hall, assistant principal, cheerleading advisor, senior class play."

The frustration of teachers in many of these situations is evident from their answers to the questionnaires. A teacher who teaches two English classes and junior high school music, plus supervising grade school music, explained her problems in even filling out a questionnaire about her program: She is an English minor who taught English for the first time last year. The school's one full-time English teacher is in her first year of teaching; the home economics teacher has one English class and the biology teacher another. My informant said frankly that she did not know what is going on in her school's English curriculum. Could any one of the teachers in this school know?

#### IV.

One might argue that some of these schools are too small and should consolidate, but the small high school is probably a permanent phenomenon of education in Minnesota. Under the inducement of state and federal funds, such small schools have found ways to cooperate, at least on the administrative level, through the Research and Development Councils. Is it possible that several small schools in an area which have similar kinds of student bodies might cooperate at the department level to plan curriculum? The directors of UMREL (Upper Midwest Regional Education Laboratory) have suggested that they are open to proposals from several small communities which might like to work together on curriculum plans.

Clearly, several factors are necessary for such cooperative curriculum planning: (1) principals who want better English curriculums and will find the ways to free teachers for such work; (2) English teachers who are not so burdened by the sheer duties of the day that they have no time to think and read; (3) teachers who are dedicated enough to take some of their free time, once they have been given some, to work on curriculum, and (4) department leaders who feel that they have both the authority and the backing to make revolutionary proposals.

It is not the intention here to suggest that all small high schools in Minnesota are doing a poor job of teaching English, nor that all larger schools are doing a good job. There are a few brilliant examples of relatively small schools that are



somehow managing the time, energy, and money to do both curriculum planning and experimentation. (Minnesota Council should, perhaps, serve as a medium through which the methods and plans of these schools could be dispensed to other small schools whose faculties are ready for such work.) But as a group these 73 small Minnesota high schools appear to be burdened by serious obstacles which are impeding creative curriculum work.

Sidney Sulkin in The Challenge of Curriculum Change says, "The strong schools are stronger today than they were 10 to 15 years ago, whereas the schools that were in a relatively weak position early in the 1950's have responded to curricular change relatively less or not at all, with the consequence that the difference between the strongest and the weakest of the country's schools is probably greater today than it has been at any time during the last 15 years."<sup>4</sup> Richard Corbin, past National Council president, however, recently reported that some of the best experimentation is going on not necessarily in the well-to-do suburban community with the best trained and best paid staff, but rather in the schools which have reached the frustration point.<sup>5</sup> If one can read tone from answers to a questionnaire, clearly many Minnesota teachers have reached the frustration point.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>James R. Squire, "National Study of High School English Programs: A School for All Season," English Journal, LV (March, 1966), 283.

<sup>2</sup>Among the 73 schools reporting enrollments under 500:

I. Number of full-time English teachers. (73 schools)  
 No answer 0 1 2 3 4 5 8 - Teachers  
 1 4 15 26 18 6 2 1

II. Number of part-time English teachers. (73 schools)  
 0 1 2 3 4 - Teachers  
 21 25 18 6 3

III. Do you have a department chairman? (73 schools)  
 Yes No Unofficially No answer  
 30 29 11 3

IV. How often does your department meet?

A. With a chairman (30)

Seldom, occasionally Yearly, bi-yearly Monthly or  
 or when needed or quarterly weekly  
 10 8 2

No answer  
 1

B. Without a chairman, an unofficial chairman or no answer  
 (43)

Seldom, occasionally Yearly, bi-yearly Monthly or  
 or when needed or quarterly weekly  
 10 3 2

No answer Never  
 20 8

V. Are you doing any curriculum planning?

A. Without a chairman or unofficial (43)

No Yes No answer Half-hearted  
 29 6 6 2

B. With a chairman (30)

No Yes No answer Half-hearted  
 13 14 1 2

VI. Do you have a printed curriculum?

Yes No State curriculum No answer  
 14 50 7 2

Among the 32 respondents who are department chairmen:

I. Education  
 Masters Bachelor's - Minor Less than a minor  
 Major  
 3 25 3 1

II. Teaching experience  
 1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20  
 15 10 4 3

III. Number of classes per day  
 6 5 4 3 Classes  
 3 21 4 4

IV. Number of students per day  
 below 70 70-95 96-120 121-150 151-160 Over  
 160  
 2 8 9 9 3 1

<sup>3</sup>Squire, "National Study," in E J, LV, 282-83.

<sup>4</sup>College Entrance Examination Board, The Challenge of Curricular Change, p. XIV.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Corbin, The Teaching of Writing in Our Schools (New York: 1966), p. 103. \* \* \* \*

Dr. Anna Lee Stensland, Executive Secretary of the MCTE, is Associate Professor of English at UMD, Duluth.