The Politics of Curriculum Making

Lecture 11
OTED 785/885

20 July, 2007 Lecture 11, Politics of Curriculum Making

Curriculum policy is seldom rational or based on research.

- Decisions are not often based on careful analysis of content in the disciplines and on societal needs, or on studies of the learning process and concerns of learners.
- The official curriculum—the content found in standards, frameworks, curriculum guides, tests, texts, and the like—is not neutral knowledge.
- It is knowledge that has been selected by some individual or group and implies a particular vision of what society should be like.

The Politics Involved
Curriculum decision making is a political process.

- Pressure groups are proposing competing values about what to teach.
- The state board is confronted
- Members of state and local public agencies legally responsible for these decisions are accepting and rejecting different values in some way:— They bargain
— They may give lip service
Political Decisions about What Will Be Taught

- The Professionalization of Reform
  - National curriculum reform is spearheaded by persons like
    - Dennis P. Doyle (technology and data-driven decisions)
    - Linda Darling-Hammond (teacher development)
    - Theodore Sizer (curriculum improvement).
- Professional reformers tend to measure their success by the number of changes they originate.

Forces of Stability

- Many communities, school boards, school administrators, and teachers are more interested in maintaining the social values of the current curriculum and the structure of the schools.
- To them, carrying out the curriculum changes proposed by professional reformers is too costly to coordinate, too difficult to guide, and too controversial to avoid conflict.

Constraints on Policy

- Constraints on policy for curriculum innovation occur through:
  - non-decision making
  - conflict avoidance
  - the threat of controversy
  - loose coupling.
Non-Decision Making

- The ability of powerful interests to control the decision-making agenda, preventing the discussion of "undesirable issues.

Conflict Avoidance

- Conflict avoidance refers to educators' unwillingness to introduce curriculum changes that conflict with community values and are likely to arouse controversy and opposition.

The Politics of Controversy

- A technique used by those with a minority viewpoint to control the majority.
  - Using a squeaky wheel tactic, those opposed to a curriculum innovation create a controversy in the hope that school authorities will back off from it.
  - Textbook publishers, for example, are known to be sensitive about introducing into their materials content that is likely to be controversial.
Loose Coupling

- The inability of policy makers to implement their curriculum plans.
  - The goals set by reformers (the ideal curriculum) may not be faithfully followed by local school boards (the formal curriculum) and certainly are not likely to be attained by the procedures of teachers in the classroom (the actual curriculum).

PARTICIPANTS IN DETERMINING CURRICULUM POLICY

- School-Based Political Participants
- Community Participants
- State Agencies
- Testing Agencies
- Publishers
- The Courts
- The Federal Government
- Colleges and Universities

School-Based Political Participants

- Teachers
  - A crucial maker of curriculum policy.
  - Teachers decide whether to spend time on drill or problem solving.
  - Teachers have considerable freedom to use their own notions of what schooling ought to be even when subjected to the external pressures of state standards and textbooks and district curriculum guides.
  - In deciding what students will get what kind of curriculum content, the teacher takes on a political role.
Community Participants
Local School Board
- Political analysis shows local boards playing a diminishing role in actual decision making.
- They often rubber-stamp the professionals’ recommendations.
- They often lack the technical competence they need to decide on specific programs.
- Growing state and federal pressure has weakened local jurisdiction.
- In large districts at least, the less specific policies are not carried out according to the board’s mandates.

Community Participants
The Public
- The role of the local lay community in formulating curriculum is minimal.
  - The public knows little about course content and is not involved with general curriculum issues.
  - Until relatively recently, local communities left curriculum planning to professionals.
    - These occasions are viewed as episodic issues that emerge under special conditions and shortly subside. It is not textbooks that cause concern, but a particular textbook under a special set of circumstances.

Community Participants
State Agencies
- The states have increased their role in educational policy at the expense of local school districts.
- This growth was a result of an increase in the states’ fiscal capacity to regulate education and the activities of interstate policy issue networks that influence federal funding and educational directives.
Community Participants

Testing Agencies
- Have helped make a "national" curriculum.
- Standardized tests for college admission have defined what students going to college must know in the way of understanding and reasoning.
- National standardized reading and math tests given in the elementary schools determine much of the specific content of the curriculum.
- The Educational Testing Service, with an annual budget in the millions, dominates the testing industry and administers a broad range of vocational and college placement tests.

Community Participants

Publishers
- The gatekeepers of ideas and knowledge.
- Most teaching in our schools is from textbooks or other curriculum material, such as guides, workbooks, and laboratory apparatus.
- Nearly 75% of students' classroom time and 90% of their homework is spent with instructional materials.

Community Participants

The Courts
- The involvement of the courts in curriculum matters has become a critical issue.
- Some curriculum specialists are disturbed by what they see as a trend in the courts to exceed their authority in curriculum matters:
  - Have mandated specific tests, methods, and materials that schools must use.
  - Have even mandated achievement goals in desegregation cases which, in effect, have made them the evaluators of school curriculum and programs.
Community Participants

The Federal Government

- In the 1960s and 1970s, it had a very powerful influence on the kinds of materials used in schools.
  - Dwarfed all previous curriculum development efforts by states, districts, and private enterprise.
  - Regional laboratories, academic scholars, and nonprofit organizations produced curriculum materials that have been used in most of our schools.
  - This material modified the content of existing subject matter—mathematics, science, English, and reading.
  - Specifying the use of standardized tests for evaluating the projects they finance, federal agencies fostered national objectives.

Community Participants

Foundations

- Foundations are a major source of funds and influence on the curriculum.
- The Ford, Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Kettering foundations have been very active in curriculum development.
- Foundations have made deliberate efforts to change the habits of school systems and to modify the curriculum by underwriting the production of locally made curriculum materials.

Community Participants

Special Interests

- Special interest groups follow a common strategy in influencing curriculum content:
  - they offer their own evaluation criteria for judging instructional materials, in contrast to the criteria given by the state
  - they address the school board politically rather than going through the bureaucratic structure of the school
  - they rely on moral arguments and their own moral positions.
Admittance standards have a significant impact on the high school curriculum.

- Required type courses
- Standardized tests accepted
- Other requirements such as athletic participation, activities (band, drama, journalism over vocational subjects)

The control of curriculum in the United States is a shared responsibility.

Authority is dispensed throughout local, state, and federal government

Curriculum mandates are issued from all three branches of government-legislative, executive, and judicial.

These mandates include

- Federal court actions such as those pertaining to meeting the language needs of non-English-speaking persons and of children with specific handicaps
- Federal funds to school districts if they agree to meet certain conditions for their use
  - disadvantaged children
  - mathematical
  - ethnic studies
  - career education
  - consumer education
  - for science
  - environmental education
  - vocational education
  - gifted education
State court decisions relating to school financing, planning, and implementation of educational programs

Court decisions giving participation privileges to parents and students as well as increased use of legal contracts (collective bargaining) which result in mandates directly or indirectly affecting curriculum, preempting the control by local boards and educators.

Shared control has produced conflict.

Federal mandates often combine both educational and social or political goals, as in grant programs for special groups.

While these mandates draw attention to the poor, the minorities, and the handicapped, they also conflict with traditional views of how best to develop understanding, skills, and attitudes among learners.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The debate over the proper division of responsibility among federal, state, and local governments shows no sign of being settled.

Issues such as a federal mathematics and science program, tax credits, and school prayer keep the focus on the federal role.

Intergovernmental relations will remain numerous and complex.
What about In Business and Industry?

- You have political issues over control of training
  - Is it centralized or decentralized?
  - Who controls the funds for training?
  - Who has approval authority for training vendors?
  - Is HRD a separate function or is it part of HRM?
  - Is training seen as a resource or a cost of doing business?

Final Exam

- We will have it on August 6.
  - You will be able to access it on the web site at 10 AM, August 6th and you must email your answer back by 10 AM on August 7th.
  - Open book, open notes. May not work on it with other persons. I will not answer any questions.

What will the final it cover?

- Be able to explain how to develop a curriculum or training program/course.
- Demonstrate that you know the parts of a curriculum and what should be included in them.
- Demonstrate you understand the importance of linking activities, objectives, goals, and aims.
Be prepared to explain who has curriculum control in our society.

Be prepared to explain your philosophy that guides your curriculum development.

Be prepared to differential among the humanistic, social reconstructionist, systematic, and academic curriculum forces.

Next week’s assignment

- Read chapter 11, Current Issues
- Prepare for the final exam
- Take your Number one out to dinner for putting up with you taking this crazy course this summer!