

# Foundations of Education and Instructional Assessment/Curriculum/Controversy

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## 1 Who Decides What is Taught?

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**“Good schools, like good societies and good families, celebrate and cherish diversity.”** —Deborah Meier

### Food For Thought

A school's core curriculum should not be shaped without forethought. What do our students need to know today? What will they need to know tomorrow? What about their unique and individual lives determines what they need to know? Finally, wrapping all of these issues into the question at hand, who decides what is taught?

- Consider the following questions, and develop your own opinion.

Must a student's socioeconomic-driven factors and personal needs be considered in order to form a proper educational plan? Must each of us learn the same content nationwide in order to reach a proper level of education?

### Local, or National?

Throughout the history of American education, a student's need for the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic has been obvious and a concentration of the accepted curriculum. But, our national curriculum was not always nationally shaped. In the past, before America's

school system operated under national oversight, teachers traveled from town to town and worked on a freelance basis for a few weeks. Without oversight, the teacher taught as he/she saw fit.

Modern strides in science have made staples of classes focused on branches of biology, computer science and advanced mathematics, especially for students thinking of attending a university and going into fields requiring further academically-advanced skill sets. Elective studies, often geared towards the arts, have a tendency to receive funding based on availability, rather than out of necessity. “Funding for the visual arts, music, theater and dance are losing ground across the country due to a ballooning deficit and legislation that caters to standardized testing...Compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act, which makes teaching to standardized testing regulatory, is being cited by some in the education field as the main reason why arts funding is on the chopping block as the first sacrifice to be made (Harbaugh).” So, we recognize nationally that there are basic classes needing to be taught, and that others are not always necessary in order to lead a successful life. These cut classes have been classified as optional when funding runs low, and when well-intentioned acts, such as No Child Left Behind, place emphasis on instilling the fundamentals of modern education. In turn, national philosophies are not able to always satisfy local and personal needs, therefore curriculum should be drafted with some insight.

One study determined that nationally-controlled educational systems have teachers who are “more likely to teach the same mathematics curriculum as teachers in educational systems with local control (Stevenson/Baker, 1).” This, as we've examined, means that we seem to have a national understanding regarding the importance of core education. The study goes on to show a disparity, stating that, “when the control of curricular issues is at the national level, the amount of the mathematics curriculum that is taught is generally not related to the characteristics of the teachers of the students, whereas in educational systems with local control, it is related to teachers' and students' characteristics (Stevenson/Baker, 1).” Locally controlled bodies draft culturally-influenced curricula, while still teaching alongside national regulations. This is an important factor when considering the amount of authority that should be placed on national boards, versus local decision making boards.

Is it better to have a broad-reaching math (or any other

field of study) education plan, or is it better to have a plan geared towards the needs of particular communities and states? A state that makes much of its money off of nuclear engineering, or the manufacturing of battleships, could require a workforce with higher math skills than a part of the country graduating future farmers.

That said, Even if higher levels of math (as an example) weren't required in all states, or areas of a state, every level of math education should still be made available to any student desiring the content. This can be provided through distance-education means, like internet broadcasts. A national board may not have the foresight to dedicate particular classes to areas of the country with varying educational needs, and certain districts may simply not have the funds to hire teachers for less-than-popular class choices; today's ever-cheaper communication advances can help fill in any gaps.

### **Who determines content?**

Who decides what is taught? "In the U.S., each state, with the individual school districts, establishes the curricula taught. Each state, however, builds its curriculum with great participation of national academic subject groups selected by the United States Department of Education (Wikipedia)." It's a team effort, but the debate involves determining which body should have the heaviest hand in the final decision making process, regarding what should be offered.

In one experiment of ways to govern a school system (the Denver Curriculum Program), teachers were given the duty of helping to recreate the school system's curriculum. The outcome was that "Teacher participation resulted in a teaching staff increasingly alert to its problems. The program of curriculum revision had stimulated and motivated professional study and had been most effective in creating the desire for the assistance of constructive supervision. Teacher participation had also resulted in the emergence of leadership. It placed a premium on the initiative of the individual teacher (Peltier, 215)." Teachers were able to step up and take the reins of their schools. This might not be possible everywhere, depending on the collective ambitions of individual teaching staffs, but here is an example of how local decision making works, and can benefit an area. As a bonus, the teachers' involvement boosted the confidence of the local school structure in its own capabilities.

Another part of the debate should mention the creation of textbooks. Regardless of the decisions as to what is taught, and where, eventually the curriculum will revolve around the content that is held in textbooks. Textbooks are not written by high-school teachers, for high-school teachers. Textbooks are penned by "college professors, many of whom have never spent a day as a teacher in the schools for which they are attempting to write texts (Borgeson, 181)." This isn't to say that college professors should not be writing the textbooks, since many high-school teachers likely don't have adequate training

to complete the process of creating a textbook. This issue is simply brought up to point out a gap between those who decide what content is available, and those actually teaching and learning in a live classroom setting. It wouldn't be possible for each school district to write its own text books, but that doesn't nullify the disparity.

### **School: a Social Evolution Context**

The American educational system continuously evolves, and is composed of variously influenced tentacles. Historically, as the leading groups within society adapted the curriculum to meet their group-related needs, "similar social groups continued to benefit and, likewise, other social groups were disadvantaged (Goodson, 74)." Only by adapting naturally-evolving curricular needs, based upon what is right for societal and local needs, will America's system of education benefit the many and help the needy rise to individual potential. With the world evolving in so many ways, so must education. The economy of America is changing everyday. The international trade market affects the country in many ways. Trade is very important to the growth of the country, representing 25 percent of the country's gross domestic product. (Source)Trade in services once was a large export but for the past seven years service imports have grown faster than service exports (source). Most industries face international competition causing for companies to look for the lowest-cost work they can work to cut cost. With all these things going on in the economy in America, the government must take a look into evolving educations. For most students and schools this means that high school is not the end of education like it was over 30 years ago. Times are changing and thirty years ago you could get a job without any education after high school. With the job competition on the rise it will be more important for students to go to college in turn changing the outlook on high school across the nation. So what high school students were doing 30 years ago, will that be good for the economy? Should it stay the same?

This is possible on a national level, on a local level, or through a combination of both. Which would you prefer? Who should decide what is taught, to whom?

### **Independence in thought - COMMENTARY**

Schools are created for society, by selected members of society. The simple fact that the decision making bodies are "selected" is reason enough to require that their decisions are grounded in objectivity, while allowing for classes relevant to particular areas of the country with unique needs. Hopefully those in the position of decision makers are world wise and understanding that cultures can change so much from one area of a city and state to the next.

It comes to light that curricula should not be set in stone. As culture and society changes, changes in curricula are necessary. America may be a unified jigsaw, but each citizen doesn't necessarily need, or want, to learn the same as every other. Students should certainly receive

and learn non-optional core material, but students nationwide will not benefit by learning through an educational plan drafted entirely as though all people are exactly the same, everywhere. We are all people, true enough, but it's known that culture plays a powerful role in shaping what people value, and don't, in education. We should allow for cultural and personal variation as much as we can afford to, while continuing to reinforce universal education needs.

It seems an obvious step that each district should be self-motivated and granted the right to determine its own curriculum, at least in part. How can a man in a California computer-science funded locality determine what is best learned by a man in a West Virginian mining community? The answer is that he really can't. He may be able to set a theoretical basis for what all people need know, but he'll never be able to properly dictate what is entirely appropriate for outliers determined by cultural and socioeconomic variation. We may share a larger national border, but we shouldn't expect that a national educational edict be followed, unless it also considers personal and local-based social requirements.

**“The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence that it is not utterly absurd.”** —Bertrand Russell

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#### MULTIPLE CHOICE – CIRCLE THE CORRECT ANSWER FOR EACH

1) Choose the correct answer to fill in the blank:

Historically, three topics that have always held a necessary place in educational curricula are Reading, Writing, and \_\_\_\_\_. a) Home Economics b) Art c) Drama d) Arithmetic e) Physical Education

2) Choose the answer that best fills the blank, according to the text:

Nationally-controlled educational systems have teachers who are “\_\_\_\_\_ likely to teach the same mathematics curriculum as teachers in educational systems with local control.” a) less b) just as c) more

3) Choose the correct answer to fill in the blank:

Most High School textbooks are written by \_\_\_\_\_ educators. a) Elementary School b) Middle School c) High School d) College

4) Choose the correct answer to fill in the blank:

The board, out of the list below, which takes part in setting curricula nationally, is the \_\_\_\_\_. a) Department of Education b) Department of Curricula c) Department of Childhood Development d) Department of Schooling e) Department of Thought

5) Choose the correct answer to fill in the blank, based on the text:

Teacher participation results in the emergence of \_\_\_\_\_ roles. a) Parental b) Peer c) Social d) Interpersonal e) Leadership

**\*\*MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWER KEY:**  
1)D;2)B;3)D;4)A;5)E\*\*

**ESSAY TOPIC:** Working from your readings and personal experiences, write a short essay explaining how you think curricula should be drafted. Should national boards draft a country-wide curriculum that is based on nationally-accepted norms considering the content students are taught, or should local education bodies have the option of drafting culture-specific curricula, operating in conjunction with core subjects?

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#### TEST SECTION

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