

Research Brief

High School Curriculum

Question:

- What should the High School Curriculum be?
- What should we consider while we build our curriculum?

Summary of Findings:

There is a fair amount of research on individual curricular experiments in specific high school courses, but general research on high school curriculum and what the curriculum should be is hard to find and is far out weighed by theory and policy. Most of the theory and policy literature are dominated by discussions of state and national standards. There is little debate about the quality or appropriateness of those national content standards and the need for academic rigor. Discussion is over how the standards should be implemented. Maine's Promising Futures report is held up as a national standard for high school curricular reform. Ted Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools is also pointed to for its exemplary work with high school curriculum.

The one major research study on high school curriculum is the Eight Year Study. Considered by many educational researchers to be one of the best program evaluation studies ever conducted, it followed the students from 30 experimental high schools during the 1930's. Although the students from the experimental schools only did as well or slightly better on standardized test scores than students from their traditional counterparts, the students from the experimental schools showed many improvements in other areas. The traditional separate subject approach appeared to be the least effective for preparing students, even for things that we'd always assumed it was best for. The most effect schools used an approach that was very different, using content from the disciplines of knowledge, but instead of organizing it by subjects, organizing it around themes of significance to their students. This approach was called Core Curriculum (this term now has a different connotation) and is now often referred to as Curriculum Integration. Despite how long ago this study was conducted, it is considered to be highly applicable to today's school improvement efforts.

Major Findings and Conclusions:

- √ Curriculum Developments:
 - Improved achievement scores in most subjects in most studies
 - Careers shape the curriculum
 - The common problems of american youth become the heart of the curriculum
 - Youth study and share the life of the community

- The schools help young people get ready to earn a living
- Gifted intellects are stimulated and challenged
- The arts belong to all the people
- Youth search for life's meaning
- Two forces unite to determine the curriculum

√ Changes in Ways of Teaching:

- Democratic processes enter the classroom
- New materials for learning are essential
- Problem solving develops the habit of reflective thinking
- Pioneering is hard but gratifying

√ Coalition of Essential Schools Common Principals:

- Learning to use one's mind well
- Less is more, depth over coverage
- Goals apply to all students
- Personalization
- Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach
- Demonstration of mastery
- A tone of decency and trust
- Commitment to the entire school
- Resources dedicated to teaching and learning
- Democracy and equity

Online Resources:

The Story of the Eight Year Study

The report of the Progressive Education Association's Commission on the Relation of School and College, the Eight Year Study, considered by many educational researchers to be one of the best program evaluation studies ever conducted, followed the students from more than 30 experimental high schools during the 1930's. The study isn't well remembered, since it was published in 1942 and the American mind was focused on other matters.

<http://www.8yearstudy.org/>

How the Curriculum Changed in the 30 Schools

<http://www.8yearstudy.org/chapter3.html>

What Was Learned From The Study

<http://www.8yearstudy.org/chapter6.html>

Revisiting the Eight-Year Study and Rethinking the Focus of Educational Policy Analysis.

The Eight -Year Study was a landmark attempt to design, implement, and evaluate democratic secondary schools. Reexamining this 1930s initiative allows us to consider how democratic priorities can transform educational practice, evaluation, and policy analysis. The norms, values, and technologies that currently guide mainstream analysis are poorly suited to record and report the strengths of the democratic orientation inspired by Dewey's work.

Kahne, Joseph

Educational Policy v9 n1 p4-23 Mar 1995

<http://www2.msstate.edu/~kem5/PAGES/FILES/DOCUMENTS/Eightyearstudy.htm>

Coalition of Essential Schools

Instead of serving as a "cookie-cutter model," CES uses its Common Principles to inspire a school community to examine its priorities. CES schools make a difference for kids' learning and success. Students in Coalition schools drop out at lower rates, graduate at higher rates, and go on to college.

<http://www.essentialschools.org/>

Promising Futures: A Call to Improve Learning for Maine's Secondary Students

Promising Futures, recommends an ambitious approach to learning. Its purpose is to generate creative, student-responsive, and forward-thinking instruction and school organization. The report invites readers, first, to think about six Core Principles that, in the Commission's judgment, lie at the heart of all secondary educational planning and practice. Second, it recommends two sets of Core Practices, one addressing learning and teaching activities and one addressing how the school functions to support these learning and teaching practices. Finally, Promising Futures recommends steps that policy-makers and leaders beyond the school -- school committees, community leaders, state law makers, and professional associations -- can take to encourage and support secondary school improvement.

<http://www.state.me.us/education/cse/PF%20Links.htm>

Great Maine Schools Project

This grant supports implementation of recommendations from Promising Futures: A Call to Improve Learning for Maine's Secondary Students, the report published by the Maine Commission on Secondary Education. The goal is to create environments for personalized learning for all Maine students, and to prepare all students for success in college, the workforce, and their communities.

<http://www.mitchellinstitute.org/Gates/>

National Mathematics Education Standards

<http://standards.nctm.org/>



National Science Education Standards

<http://www.nap.edu/catalog/4962.html>

National Standards for the English Language Arts

<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards>

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

<http://www.ncss.org/standards/>

National Education Technology Standards

<http://cnets.iste.org/>

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Engaged Learning

Submitted By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful

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