The creation of a gender-fair multicultural curriculum is the necessary basis for the equitable schooling of all girls and boys in the United States. The key to success in curriculum reform is the inclusion of everyone with a stake in the schools in an effective, productive process. Defining the term multicultural education illustrates the different meanings that have evolved. The national curriculum policy debate over the standards-setting and assessment-design processes focuses on five controversial issues: (1) the measurement of performance; (2) the use of national standards; (3) the effect of national standards on local control of education; (4) the knowledge included in national standards; and (5) the development of a national core curriculum through national standards and assessment. In order to achieve a gender-fair multicultural curriculum, the changes must address national policy, state and local curriculum designs, textbook and materials adoption, classroom practices, and assessment systems. To ensure successful multicultural curriculum reform, diversity of participants at all levels of the process is important. A curriculum description provides eight ingredients for the ideal gender-fair multicultural curriculum; four strategies to develop a curriculum reform process that effectively brings everyone involved in the schools together; and five pitfalls that can damage the process. Contains 21 references. (CK)
Creating a Gender-Fair Multicultural Curriculum

GENDER EQUITY: AN ELUSIVE GOAL

As a democratic, pluralistic society, America draws its strength from educating all its citizens to achieve their full potential. It is therefore imperative that the formal curriculum, which conveys the central messages of education, provides students with "mirrors" reflecting their own experiences as well as "windows" revealing those of others. But for most students, particularly girls and minorities, "the present curriculum provides many windows and few mirrors."

The pervasiveness of inequity in the curriculum was one of the major conclusions of The AAUW Report: How Schools Shortchange Girls, released in February 1992 (see the "Resources" box on page 4). The report assessed how schooling has changed for girls since 1972, when the federal government passed Title IX of the Education Amendments, prohibiting sex discrimination in education. The report concluded that after 20 years of research and reform efforts aimed at ensuring gender equity, more has been said than done to improve schooling for girls. Despite the many gains women have made in the past quarter-century, gender equity in education remains an elusive goal.

To support these efforts, AAUW has produced a series of issue briefs addressing gender equity and educational restructuring, classroom practices, and teacher training (see the "Resources" box on page 4). In this brief, we turn to the complex question of creating a gender-fair multicultural curriculum, the necessary basis for equitable schooling for all American girls and boys. Such a curriculum would offer both "windows" and "mirrors" to students of both sexes from all of America's cultures.

Finding the balance between America's shared culture and its many overlapping "microcultures" has never been easy. Those who follow local school policy know that curriculum reform is always potentially controversial. The key to success is including everyone with a stake in the schools in an effective, productive process.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: DEFINING TERMS

Because the United States is a pluralistic society, our culture is a complex web of overlapping cultures. National origin creates one strand of the web; race and ethnicity create another strand; class or socioeconomic status creates another; occupational and religious affiliations create yet another; and so on. All Americans both share elements of a broad, national culture and belong to other cultural groups that constitute American society. Indeed, this marvelous "weaving...of many threads of all sizes and colors" is the defining characteristic of American culture.

By exploring the many varieties of American experience, an equitable multi-
cultural curriculum would convey the complexities of American cultural pluralism.

The term "multicultural education" is used here in its broadest and most frequently used sense, to encompass both curriculum (what is taught) and classroom practice (how it is taught). Multicultural education requires:

- transforming the whole curriculum to provide students with knowledge about the entire range of cultures that constitute American society;
- examining the experiences of each cultural group from its own perspective;
- incorporating teaching practices that adapt to girls—as well as boys—in combination with gender-fairness;
- providing diverse learning environments that can be adapted to the learning styles of female and male students from many cultures, thus enabling them to achieve their full potential;
- helping students develop the ability to communicate and function effectively with diverse groups and within multiple cultures—requiring skills for success in today's America.

Though this definition of multicultural education is generally accepted by education scholars and policymakers, it is still relatively new. It has evolved—and continues to evolve—from the efforts of historically underrepresented groups to obtain equal opportunity for all children. There is still much debate over how multicultural education is defined, and scholars within this movement disagree about the meaning of various terms used in the debate.

One piece of this debate that has been much in the news is the call by some African American scholars for an Afrocentric curriculum. Although some proponents define it—and most people generally perceive it—as a curriculum focusing entirely on African American cultures, this definition is rejected by many other African American scholars and educators. These scholars use the term "Afrocentric curriculum" to denote the practice of describing, within a larger multicultural curriculum, the African American experience from that culture's perspective. Similarly, some proposals for Afrocentric curriculum involve establishing separate Afrocentric schools for African American children, while others call for creating Afrocentric courses within traditional schools.

As this example illustrates, the evolving nature of the theory of multicultural education means that scholars may use the term in different ways. Two especially common uses of the term "multicultural education," both of which reflect earlier stages of the theory, are not currently accepted:

- Teaching us about others: Special, isolated, or pull-out courses intended to assimilate members of "other" cultural groups into the dominant culture. This approach assumes that the goal of education is to instil the culture of those groups that define themselves as "mainstream" into all members of society. Therefore, if adopted, it is imperative that the content standards and assessment systems be gender-fair and multicultural.

In the United States, curricula are determined at the state and local levels. But most American public schools follow a highly uniform curriculum that has been shaped by tradition.

- Teaching others to be like us: Special, isolated, or pull-out courses intended to assimilate members of "other" cultural groups into the dominant culture. This approach assumes that the goal of education is to instil the culture of those groups that define themselves as "mainstream" into all members of society. Therefore, if adopted, it is imperative that the content standards and assessment systems be gender-fair and multicultural.

The debate over the standards-setting and assessment-design processes has coalesced around five issues:

**How Do We Measure Performance?**

Many education experts have criticized the proposals for a national system of tests and evaluation systems designed to measure student achievement. These critics argue that the current proposals for standardized tests are problematic to the mainstream culture. The debate over diversity education means that scholars may use the term in different ways. Two especially common uses of the term "multicultural education," both of which reflect earlier stages of the theory, are not currently accepted:

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connected and holistic, while boys tend to prefer a more separated, analytical approach. A girl might be more likely to choose to study nursing home life by interviewing a resident and writing a biography, while a boy might be more likely to do a statistical analysis of the demographic characteristics of the residents. A gender-fair assessment system would not only test both skills—quantitative analysis and narrative analysis—but also would balance the test between them.

A national assessment system must draw on the strengths of both genders and all cultures by testing competency in all skills required by our society.

Are National Standards the Right Tool? Some education experts don't believe that performance on national assessments—particularly standardized tests—correlates highly with national economic performance. They claim that no assessment system can adequately measure the knowledge and skills that lead to economic success. They also fear that a system of standards and assessments will simply create a generation of students who, while they test well, can't think or work well. But proponents of standards and assessments believe that under this system American students would be required to learn more, resulting in a better-qualified labor force.

Will National Standards Undermine Local Control of Education? Educators and concerned citizens worry that establishing national standards will interfere with a cherished American tradition: local control of education. NCEST attempted to answer these critics by rejecting the concept of a single national test in favor of allowing states to select from a range of tests. NCEST also pointed out that local schools would be free to design any curriculum that met the national standards.

What Knowledge Should Standards Include? Content standards are being developed by national organizations of teachers and scholars, such as the national associations for teachers of math and English, in each of the core content areas (see the "Resources" box on page 4). Critics point out that the list of "core" disciplines in the National Goals omits important subjects like civics, social studies, arts education, and foreign language. They also argue that developing standards independently in subject-based organizations leads to a lack of coordination across the curriculum.

Do National Standards and Assessments Create a National Core Curriculum? Some educators suggest that all U.S. schools should teach a core curriculum. One of the best-known spokespersons for this position is E.D. Hirsch, whose Core Knowledge Foundation has developed a detailed and specific curriculum designed to compose half the elementary curriculum for grades one through six.

Although there is widespread agreement that America's strong tradition of local control of education makes it politically unfeasible to mandate such a curriculum at the federal level, some analysts fear that the national standards, no matter how broadly drawn, will create a de facto national curriculum. Few dispute that Americans share a common cultural heritage that should be taught in our schools. The trouble arises over what should be included in that shared body of knowledge. Although there is no reason in theory that a core curriculum could not be a gender-fair multicultural curriculum, most proponents of this proposal want to preserve the traditional curriculum.

THE "NEW SCHOLARSHIP"

These controversies reflect an ongoing debate in academia. Historically, the academy has performed two functions in society: transmitting existing knowledge across generations and producing new knowledge. In the last quarter-century, academics have produced "an astonishing body of new knowledge about how cultures treat those groups and individuals who are branded as not belonging to the dominant society." Some scholars term this research the "new scholarship."

The current debates concern the incorporation of this new body of knowledge—for instance, what the new scholarship has revealed about the everyday life of working-class women in American history—into the curricula of colleges and schools. In higher education, the debate takes the form of conflict over extending tenure to and accusations of political bias against the academics producing this research. In elementary and secondary education, it takes the form of resistance to adopting a multicultural curriculum that would reflect this research.

Three arguments typically are made against including the new scholarship in the curriculum:

1. It is less rigorous and of lower quality than traditional scholarship.
2. Including multicultural scholarship in the curriculum diminishes the story of our common heritage and distorts the historical record.
3. Focusing on diversity fosters cultural and political disunity.

**Scholarly Excellence.** Critics of the new scholarship argue that its naive and simplistic and that it should be rejected because it is not rigorous or is not based on serious research. The academic press has clearly addressed many of these concerns. The new scholarship has addressed and remedied these deficiencies.
RESOURCES

AAUW PUBLICATIONS
To order the resources in this column, contact the AAUW Sales Office at 800/225-9998, ext. 219. A delivery charge will be added to each order. Prices are subject to change.


A Call to Action: Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (1991). Synopsis of the AAUW poll and January 1991 national roundtable attended by leaders in government, industry, and education—with action ideas for community change. AS12 [$12.95 members/$14.95 nonmembers]


AAUW Issue Briefs relating to education ($1.00 each):
- "Creating a Gender-Fair Multicultural Curriculum" (D3)
- "Equitable Treatment of Girls and Boys in the Classroom" (C1)
- "Restructuring Education: Getting Girls Into America's Goals" (D6)
- "Stalled Agenda: Gender Equity and the Training of Educators" (B19)
- "Vocational Education: Equity in the Making?" (C9)
- "College Admissions Tests: Opportunities or Roadblocks?" (B17)
- "Women and Tenure: The Opportunity of a Century" (D2)

CURRICULUM REPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS (GENERAL)

The American Tapestry: Infusing Multiculturalism in Education. Send $7.00 to the National Association of State Boards of Education, Attention: Publications Department, 1012 Cameron Street, Alexandria, VA 22314; 703/684-4000.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development produces a variety of materials on curriculum issues. For a catalog, contact ASCD, 1250 North Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-9719; 703/549-9110.

One Nation, Many Peoples: A Declaration of Cultural Interdependence (1991). Contact the New York State Education Department (address: Albany, New York 12234) for a limited number of free copies of this report and, later, for the state's final curriculum outline.


CURRICULUM DOCUMENTS BY DISCIPLINE


Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century (1989). Send $7.00 plus $2.50 shipping and handling to the National Council for the Social Studies, 3501 Newark Street N.W., Washington, DC 20016 or call the warehouse at 800/683-0812.
The Ideal Curriculum

Ingredients and Strategies

**INGREDIENTS**

*The ideal gender-fair multicultural curriculum:*

- **INCORPORATES** the best of the “new scholarship” on gender, race, ethnicity, and class. This scholarship is particularly prominent in history, social studies, and literature.

- **PROVIDES** every student with knowledge of the wide range of American cultures as well as competence in using the tools of our shared culture and the ability to critique this culture from multiple perspectives.

- **ENCOMPASSES AND AFFIRMS** all of our past, denying none of it.

- **USES** textbooks and materials that present multiple perspectives, showing women and all cultural groups—not just elites—as active participants, producers, and doers in their families, occupations, communities, cultures, and societies.

**STRATEGIES**

*These strategies can help develop a curriculum reform process that will effectively bring together everyone involved in the schools:*

- **BRING** many voices into the debate. Do this by ensuring diverse representation on committees of experts and by encouraging public comment from a range of diverse groups.

- **COMBINE** top-level clout with grassroots involvement.

- **INSIST** that curriculum review/design committees include teachers. To ensure coherence and coordination, make sure that there are representatives from all grade levels and disciplines.

- **FOCUS** on expanding the traditional curriculum to be more inclusive instead of attacking it.

- **DRAWS** on the multicultural resources of the local community.

- **COORDINATES** content, attitudes, and skills across the curriculum and across grade levels.

- **PROMOTES** use of a wide range of teaching practices designed to play to the strengths of all learning styles. (The new scholarship on learning styles will be especially helpful in science, math, and the communication arts.)

- **LINKS** the curriculum to a gender- and culture-balanced assessment system that provides opportunities for both performance reviews and testing. The questions and tasks used in these reviews and tests would include a diversity of settings and cultural backgrounds.

**PITFALLS**

*These dynamics can damage the process:*

- **MISLEADING LABELING.** Some curriculum proposals “talk the talk” but fail to “walk the walk”: they are portrayed as being multicultural, but the content isn’t there.

- **DUELING ETHNOCENTRIC CURRICULA.** Trading one ethnocentric curriculum for another one is self-defeating.

- **THE TRUTH MONOPOLY.** Defenders of the traditional curriculum tend to present it as “objective truth” that will be distorted by including the findings of the new scholarship. But the real question is: What does the best scholarship—both old and new—tell us about our society? The answers belong in the curriculum.

- **POLARIZING RHETORIC.** Don’t allow the debate to be framed as a winner-take-all, either/or choice between mutually exclusive absolutes. Look for a “win-win” solution that each participant can support.

- **TEACHER BASHING.** Don’t join those who blame teachers for every deficiency in student performance.
American life and culture is much more diverse, complex, and rich than the traditional curriculum teaches us.

citizens and public hearings involved in the procedures described above. Here are some strategies that work:

- **Lobby those who make appointments to panels and committees to include a diversity of voices on those committees.** In Florida, state officeholders making appointments to the Multicultural Education Review Task Force were given specific demographic requirements to fulfill with those appointments. For instance, they had to appoint at least one teacher and one northern Florida resident.

- **Recruit and encourage a range of diverse organizations and individuals to participate in public hearings and other opportunities for review and comment.** Emphasize the advantages of joining the process rather than attacking it. In California, for instance, observers on both sides of the issue believe that the public comment on the first draft of the latest version of the state curriculum standards in history and social science resulted in a significant increase in the new curriculum's multicultural content.

- **Educate the public.** In New York, opponents of multicultural education portrayed it as an abandonment of the traditional curriculum rather than as a transformation of that curriculum designed to reflect the realities of our pluralistic society. It's easier—and more effective—to define your own terms up front than to correct misunderstandings later.

With its long history of education activism and its commitment to mediating diverse points of view to find common ground, AAUW is ideally equipped to play a leading role in these efforts. AAUW branches, working in coalition with other community organizations, can take the following actions:

- **Review the curriculum and textbooks in the local school district.**
- **Analyze proposed curricula for gender-equity and multicultural components.**
- **Provide local policymakers with copies of this brief and other information on gender-fair multicultural education.**

(For more ideas, see the "Resources" box on page 4.)

**FINDING THE BALANCE**

In a pluralistic society, this question must be addressed: what is the appropriate balance in the curriculum between emphasizing our commonality and our differences? We can agree that all children need to learn about the elements of common culture that bind us together as a nation. This enables everyone not only to participate in our national life but also to analyze and critique it. Yet women and members of "other" cultures also deserve the empowerment that comes from studying one's own culture and learning in one's own style. Further, the cultural group that has traditionally shaped the curriculum in its own image no longer constitutes—if indeed it ever did—the majority of the population.

American life and culture is much more diverse, complex, and rich than the traditional curriculum teaches us. The schools of the future need gender-fair multicultural curricula that prepare coming generations to live and work in our pluralistic society.

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**FOOTNOTES**

1. Emily N. Curriculum As Window and Mirror. In Learning for All Voices: Gender Balancing the School Curriculum (Summit, NJ: Oak Knoll School, 1980).


5. Test of Student Proficiency: Education Goals Adopted by Governors. Education Week (March 7, 1990), pp. 6 and 11.


