

The Challenge of Selecting an Effective Curriculum

By Beverly White

A well-planned curriculum can provide the academic foundation for an excellent education for Christian school students. Often, because the development of such a curriculum can be time consuming and involved, it is not jointly pursued by the principal and teachers. Though perhaps there is no truly feasible way to lighten the burden of the curriculum development process, the following article offers a methodical, structured approach for the selection and development of a curriculum that will fit a Christian school's academic needs.

Three teachers walk slowly down the hall into the principal's office. The principal, Mr. Jasmine, greets the teachers and asks them to be seated. Mrs. Jones, the spokesperson of the committee of three, is the first to speak.

"Mr. Jasmine, could we talk to you a few minutes about our history curriculum?"

"Why certainly, Mrs. Jones," Mr. Jasmine replies. "I would be very interested in what you think about the history textbooks we are using. But in all honesty, I must admit that I know very little about history, especially in the elementary grades."

Mrs. Jones continues with her remarks: "We have been discussing our history curriculum and what we hope to accomplish in our history classes. To be honest with you, Mr. Jasmine, we are not happy with the textbooks we are presently using. Our curriculum spends too much time on unimportant things. Besides that, the publisher's tests never seem to fit what we think should be tested."

Mr. Jasmine leans forward, takes a note pad from his desk, and begins writing as Mrs. Jones continues her remarks.

"And the teachers edition isn't as much help as we would like it to be. But the worst thing, Mr. Jasmine, is our total history curriculum; as a whole it just doesn't meet the needs of our students. Our students' study skills are weak; some students have difficulty reading the textbook; and, their essay answers are a disaster. We are also concerned about the obvious gaps in the scope and sequence. Could we please change our curriculum?"

Does this sound familiar? Instead of history, perhaps it is math, or science, or English or Bible. It is a rare administrator who has not heard a cry for help from his teachers in relation to the curriculum. It is discouraging when a faculty chooses a new textbook, loves it at first, and, within two years, is disenchanted - it is not any better than the last one. In fact, in some ways it is worse! What went wrong? Why was the enthusiasm short-lived?

How can situations like the one described above be avoided? What can be done to keep the curriculum-changing cycle from occurring? How can a school choose a curriculum that will meet its needs? There are no perfect curricula. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. There are some factors and guidelines, however, that satisfy both the needs of the students and the expectations of the teaching staff.

Four Factors To Consider

First of all, what is a curriculum? A curriculum is not a textbook; it is not a teacher's manual. A curriculum is a complete teaching program. It includes textbooks, curriculum guides, supplemental materials, goals and objectives, scope and sequence, and a variety of other materials. Therefore, if a teacher is expecting a textbook to be a panacea for all the academic needs in the classroom, he is going to be disappointed.

Second, the focus of a curriculum is whatever a teaching staff wants it to be. For example, the physical education department can choose a curriculum that focuses on team sports; or it can emphasize lifetime skills and habits. A science curriculum can be textbook oriented; or it can emphasize experiments and the scientific method. The history curriculum can focus on dates and events; or it can emphasize study skills, research, and higher-level thinking. The English program can major on grammar exercises; or it can major on developing writing skills. The

math department can focus on computation skills, or it can focus on word problems. If teachers want a curriculum that focuses on one aspect of the subject and the administration chooses a program or textbook based on another, conflict will occur. Learning will be affected, and the real losers will be the students. The administration and the faculty must be in harmony. If the administration does not understand curriculum, then the faculty should make the selection and explain their reasoning to the administration. The focus of the curriculum must be clearly identified and correctly implemented.

Third, a curriculum that works well at one school may not experience the same degree of success at another school. Schools have different teachers, different students, different communities, and different needs. This is why there are different textbook publishers who emphasize different content, different levels of learning, and different teacher methodology. Some of the greatest curricular disappointments happen when a school chooses a curriculum just because another school recommends it. This is not to say that recommendations should not be welcomed or seriously considered when they are submitted. Recommendations can provide valuable input into any selection process, but a curriculum choice should not be based on recommendation alone. Only as staff members analyze their own unique situation can they determine the best curriculum for their school.

Fourth, selecting a curriculum involves more than choosing a textbook. The faculty should spend extensive time and effort in evaluating and selecting a curriculum. Smaller schools normally involve the entire department. For example, all the teachers teaching math in a school would be on the committee. Larger schools may designate a curriculum committee of five to seven teachers to represent all the math teachers. The administrator can head the project or serve in an approval capacity. Either way, the curriculum committee will need to spend extra time (after school and during summer months) in the curriculum selection process. It is recommended that teachers be allowed to use in-service time and, if possible, some school time.

A school that wants a quality curriculum must make a commitment toward that end. If the school is not committed, the end results of the curriculum selection process will probably not include the desired outcomes. The selection process takes time, the effort of dedicated teachers, and a set of guidelines that controls the curriculum adoption.

Basic Curriculum Selection Guidelines

What are the basic curriculum selection guidelines that should be used in selecting a curriculum? The following five guidelines will help teachers and administrators to select the best available curriculum for their school.

1. Determine department goals and develop a K-12 scope and sequence.
2. Determine individual course or grade-level goals and basic course objectives.
3. Develop a checklist that covers curriculum specifications and teacher expectations.
4. Order samples of teaching materials from curriculum publishers.
5. Order the selected teaching materials, including textbooks, that will best aid the teachers in teaching the curriculum and in meeting the staff expectations.

A closer look at each of these guidelines will help explain how they are intended to function as part of the curriculum selection process.

Guideline 1. Determine department goals and develop a K-12 scope and sequence.

The first step in the selection process involves the entire staff (K-12) in a given subject area. Regardless of the grade level, every teacher should have an opportunity for input. For example, all the math teachers should be involved in developing department goals and an appropriate scope and sequence for the math curriculum. The same would be true for the English department, science department, Bible department, etc. As a group, each department must first determine the overall department goals. Goal statements such as the following represent the type of statement which must be determined by each department. Some of the department goals will be unique to the individual department, others will cross department boundaries.

- Application of Bible principles to daily life
- Development of patriotism • Mastery of basic computation

- Understanding of basic grammar
- Skill in using the writing process

Teachers can become frustrated when they realize their goals are not the same as their fellow teachers. The development of department goals will help standardize the school's efforts to achieve the goals that are common to different grade and age levels. This simple but basic rule will minimize such confusions. As the Old Testament prophet Amos so aptly asked, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). Unless an academic department works together, they will surely perform at a less than the desirable level. Department goals provide a general overall focus for the teachers; they verbalize what the school is hoping to accomplish in each academic discipline and identify goals that are common to all teachers - Christian living, patriotism, writing skills, mannerisms, etc.

Writing goals does not involve a significant amount of time; however, writing a scope and sequence can take months. Each grade level is assigned specific content and skills to be taught. Grade level content and skills are further subdivided into three areas: (1) material to be introduced, (2) material to be mastered, and (3) materials to be reviewed. For example, a typical scope and sequence for third grade math might specify to review basic addition and subtraction facts, to master basic multiplication and division facts, and to introduce simple long division. A sixth grade grammar scope and sequence could designate to review the eight parts of speech, to master basic punctuation, and to introduce indirect objects. Every aspect of a subject should be placed in a scope and sequence strand. A strand is a specific content area that is associated with a given course of study. For example, math would include strands for basic computation, place value, word problems, geometry, measurement, etc. English would include strands for capitalization, punctuation, parts of speech, sentence structure, etc.

When teachers begin conducting scope and sequence meetings, they usually discover overlaps, holes, and inconsistencies in their curriculum. For example, the fourth grade teacher may be expecting a higher level of notetaking proficiency than the fifth grade teacher. All the elementary grades may be studying plants, but only the sixth grade studies electricity. It is very important that the teaching staff identifies the deficiencies and develops a scope and sequence that includes all the necessary content and skills in a logical, progressive order that will plug the holes and minimize the overlaps. This is what scope and sequence is all about. This does not mean it is necessary to throw the textbook away; it means teachers need to supplement the textbook when the scope and sequence requires supplementation. The textbook is a guide to curriculum development, not the curriculum itself.

Guideline 2. Determine individual course or grade-level goals and basic course objectives.

After the K-12 scope and sequence for a given subject area has been determined, each teacher will need to develop specific course goals and objectives that are based on the content and skills specified for each grade level. For example, if the eighth grade is expected to master basic grammar, then appropriate objectives would include (1) to define and identify in sentences the eight parts of speech, (2) to diagram subject/ predicate/complement/modifiers, (3) to choose the correct subject/verb relationship including an intervening prepositional phrase. Objectives state what a student is to know and how he is to demonstrate what he knows. (For a further explanation of the writing of objectives, refer to the workbook *Writing Goals and Objectives* published by Take Tenn! Publications in Chattanooga, Tennessee.)

Guideline 3. Develop a checklist that covers curriculum specifications and staff expectations.

In preparation for reviewing textbooks and related curriculum materials, it is recommended that the curriculum committee develop a checklist that includes everything considered important in a subject's curriculum. For example, if the scope and sequence specifies that United States history be taught in junior high and high school, it should be stated in the checklist. If the goals and objectives include study skills, they should be included on the checklist. The scope and sequence, and course objectives should be the highest priority items on the checklist. Other checklist items may include cost, appearance, teacher helps, availability of practice and testing materials, etc. The checklist may appear to be over-idealistic; nevertheless, it establishes a starting point for the curriculum committee to begin their curriculum selection process. At this stage in the curriculum selection process, the number of people involved should be small enough to accommodate group discussions and decision-making. It is recommended, however, that teachers always have a chance to provide input into decisions that affect their classrooms.

Guideline 4. Order samples of teaching materials from curriculum publisher.

This would include sample textbooks and teacher editions, supplementary teaching aids, commercial curriculum guides, etc. The wider the selection of samples, the better the chance the curriculum committee will be pleased with its selection. A few cautions are in order: • No textbook will satisfy everything on the check-list. • Some publisher's materials will be more satisfactory at the elementary level, whereas, another publisher's materials would be more satisfactory at the secondary level. • Some teachers would rather spend their money on materials than on textbooks - a viable alternative in some instances, but only if it fits into the scheme designated by the curriculum committee and the teacher has prior classroom experience. At this point in the curriculum selection process, the value of the checklist will become more evident. Some of the programs being evaluated may not meet the checklist scope and sequence specifications; others may not provide enough practice. Some may not include adequate comprehension or study skill development; other materials may be unattractive, too expensive, or not durable. Some may over-emphasize rote memory; others may dwell on higher-order learning skills. All aspects of each academic program should be carefully considered by the committee.

Guideline 5. Select and order the teaching materials, including textbooks, that will best aid the teachers in teaching the curriculum.

Too often, schools choose a textbook series first. Then they write a textbook-based scope and sequence, and goals and objectives. The problem with this approach is the over-reliance on the textbook. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for textbooks to make necessary provisions for the differences in teachers, classes, and individual students. When teachers teach the textbook instead of specific content and skills, students often complete the textbook without learning the content and skills they need. The most important criteria for choosing curriculum materials is the teachers' support in teaching the material specified in the scope and sequence and the goals and objectives. However, to accomplish this task, teachers must have prior knowledge in curriculum selection. If experience is absent, the textbooks and curriculum guides will serve as guides in determining what to teach and when to teach it.

The first four steps will take at least a year or possibly longer to complete. If done correctly, it may take two years. It is important that the curriculum committee takes enough time so that everyone feels comfortable with the decisions. The administrator should definitely be involved in the final selection process. For a curriculum adoption to work successfully in a school, the administration, teachers, parents, and students should be satisfied with the final selection. This is why the process must be methodically designed and executed. Otherwise, the principal will have three teachers sitting in his office asking if the curriculum can be changed.

Conclusion

Schools will vary in their approaches to selecting a curriculum or adopting textbooks. Some schools want to use the same publisher K-12 in all subject areas. Others prefer mixing curriculums, relying on the individual whims of classroom teachers. Some teachers prefer workbooks, others hardback texts. Some try to eliminate as many commercial materials as possible and rely more on teacher creativity and student notetaking and activities. And, in most schools finances are limited. What is most important, however, is that the final choices of the curriculum committee aid the teachers as much as possible in meeting the basic cognitive requirement of all curriculums - a structured, functional scope and sequence and goals and objectives that meet the academic, spiritual, and social needs of all students. This is the heart of the curriculum and should be the foundation of the curriculum selection process.

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