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Carnegie 'Units' Should Go, Says Study by Boards

Views Curriculum as Schools' 'Fatal Flaw'

By Robert Rothman

A national panel of state-board members last week called for scrapping a time-honored feature of the American education system: graduation requirements based on the so-called Carnegie units, or the "seat time" students spend in various subject areas.

The curriculum study group of the National Association of State Boards of Education urged in a report that policymakers replace the units with systems that require students to meet defined performance standards.

Dorothy Beardmore, vice president of the Michigan Board of Education and chairman of the study group, said the panel was "trying to move away from the position that says you have to have, for example, four years of English, with no mention at all of what you were supposed to have learned after spending four years in something called 'English.'"

The group's report charges that weaknesses in the curriculum and instruction offered in most schools constitute "the fatal flaw in the American education system." It recommends a major and broad-reaching overhaul of course content, testing, and school organization.

At the heart of its proposed revision would be a core curriculum made up of six broad areas—language arts, mathematics and science, citizenship, fine arts, health, and foreign languages—which would be taught, the report says, in ways "that lead to an understanding of these subjects, rath-

er than acquiring superficial knowledge in many broad areas."

What current reform efforts have resulted in, the document charges, is a "patchwork of course requirements that inhibit effective teaching and learning."

"We have had five years of trying to do a tinkering approach," said Ms. Beardmore. "These recommendations have not been substantive enough to make the kinds of improvements people expected and still expect."

The report, "Rethinking Curriculum: A Call for Fundamental Reform," also recommends changes in instructional practices to develop students' higher-order thinking skills; an overhaul of textbook-adoption systems to encourage books that "support, rather than subvert, our educational objectives"; and more flexibility in class schedules to permit teachers to cover subjects in depth. Rehearn

But while state reforms will be needed to achieve these goals, the report says, local schools must remain free to make whatever changes they may deem necessary.

States "must set broad outcome objectives for schools (and hold schools accountable for meeting these outcomes)," it argues, "but not define precisely how schools are to achieve these broad objectives."

The study group acknowledged that its proposals may be difficult to implement and are likely to encounter resistance from "entrenched bureaucracies, subject-matter specialists, and employee organizations."

But the price of failing to act, the panel added, is too high: large numbers of students unprepared for work or higher education, or alienated from school to the point of possibly dropping out.

"Finally," their report warns, "even the survival of democracy could be threatened as society is burdened by increasing numbers of underemployed and unemployed workers and political candidates are faced with masses of undereducated, disinterested voters." (over)

NOTE FROM CHARLOTTE ISERBYT:

Finally, the Carnegie Unit, the key obstacle to full implementation of Mastery Learning/Outcome-based Education, is going to be removed. The socialist reformers can now move full speed ahead with their internationalization of American education. Mastery learning is the international teaching system.

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"Another problem is created when time itself, as in the case of the Carnegie Unit, becomes an essential condition in the definition and granting of a 'unit' of credit." Outcome-based Instructional Management: A Sociological Perspective,

William G. Spady, 1981. Funded by U.S. Department of Education, NIE Contract P-80-0194.

"School should not bind itself to 'credit hours'..." Theodore R.Sizer, Director, Coalition for Essential Schools, Common Principles, 1986.

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The System Is Failing

The 18-member study group was formed last January by NASBE in response to concerns that the school-reform movement has overlooked what the report calls a "critical component to improving schools—the content of the curriculum."

While states have increased graduation requirements and imposed new testing mandates, the report notes, these reforms have often had the harmful effect of fragmenting the curriculum and increasing the imposition of subject-matter mandates.

Moreover, it states, "there is also evidence that the reforms are not achieving our objective of assuring that all students leave school with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills they need to pursue further education or employment."

"Simply put," it says, "the school system is failing to educate a large proportion of American children."

In seeking answers to the problem, Ms. Beardmore said, the panel members agreed "within 15 minutes of our first meeting" to broaden its mandate and consider issues such as instruction, instructional materials, and school organization, in addition to curricular content.

"You can't look at curriculum, staying, school organization, instruction, and instructional materials in isolation," she said. "You've got to look at the whole field. And you have to make sure whatever changes you make in one area do not adversely affect another."

Core Curriculum

In its most sweeping proposal, the panel agreed to recommend scrapping the current emphasis on measuring instruction by Carnegie units.

In place of such a system, the panel proposed a core curriculum in which teachers would address "fewer subjects rigorously and in greater depth."

"In the case of history, for example," the report states, "it is far more important that students understand a few central themes (such as states' rights versus federalism) than to master a set of names, places, and dates."

Achieving such a shift would require a substantial change in instructional practices, it adds, recommending that teachers place greater emphasis on student presentations and dialogues, "hands-on" experiences, cross-disciplinary learning, and cooperative and peer teaching.

Teacher-training institutions must also change their teaching practices and develop partnerships with schools to help teachers adapt to new methods, the report says.

But it adds that "if these reforms are not forthcoming, state boards must consider alternative ways to assure effective teacher and administrator preparation and orientation."

"One way to do this," the report says, "would be to change teacher-certification requirements."

'Alter Operations'

Noting that textbooks and tests "drive the curriculum," the study group also proposed reforming the way books are selected and tests are administered in order to promote, rather than hinder, student learning.

For example, it urged that states abolish current practices that promote the alignment of textbooks with tests and curricula and require texts to adhere to strict "readability formulas." Such policies have led to poor-quality textbooks that hamper instruction and discourage children's interest in reading, the report charges.

Schools also should move to performance-based assessments and OUTCOME-BASED tests that develop students' creativity and thinking skills, it suggests, rather than multiple-choice tests that measure basic skills and factual information.

Implementing all the proposals, the report notes, "will require schools to alter their operations significantly."

Specifically, the panel recommended, all schools should be encouraged to make their class schedules flexible to remove the constraints of the 45-minute period.

Elementary schools can also benefit, it said, from flexible class schedules. Such a proposal, according to the report, "would permit a reduction in class size, team planning, grouping by skills as opposed to grade level, cooperative learning, schoolwide themes and cross-grade projects, opportunities for students to develop special talents, and alternatives to 'pull-out' for remedial instruction."

Copies of "Rethinking Curriculum: A Call for Fundamental Reform," are available for \$5 each from NASBE, 1012 Cameron St., Alexandria, Va. 22314.

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