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Has NCLB Narrowed School Curricula?

Middle & High Schools Have Not Shifted Focus to Math & English

Elementary Students Have Seen Changes, which Started before NCLB Shift May Be Related to State Laws

Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, Medford, MA – Despite public belief to the contrary, pressures from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) are not causing schools to shift away from teaching social studies, liberal arts, and sciences, according to a new study released by Tisch College’s Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tufts University. In fact, at the middle and high school levels, curricula have remained constant and in some cases expanded since the federal law was passed in 2001.

In grades one through five, the curriculum has narrowed over the last ten years, with more time devoted to reading and math and less to science, arts, and social studies. These declines, though, began in the 1990s before the passage of NCLB. The trends are the same in private and public schools and in schools with majorities of white and minority students.

“There has been a narrowing of the curriculum in the earlier grades, but you can’t place the blame solely on the shoulders of NCLB,” said report co-author Peter Levine, director of CIRCLE. “If we seek to broaden the K-12 curriculum to include more citizenship and arts education, amending NCLB will not suffice. Local and state policies, public expectations, textbooks, and other factors are also responsible for recent changes in the curriculum.”

CIRCLE analyzed five major federal datasets looking at the how curricula and relevant extracurricular activities have changed at the elementary, middle and high school levels from 1987 to 2005. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the full report, titled *Narrower at the Base: The American Curriculum After NCLB*, can be found at www.civicyouth.org.

No evidence was found that middle school or high school curricula have narrowed. At the high school level, there was a slight expansion of the liberal arts curriculum between 1998 and 2004. The proportion of high school students who completed major liberal arts courses grew during this time period, and the proportion of 17-year-old students who took courses such as art, drama and music increased significantly as well.

The fact that private and public elementary schools have narrowed their curricula equally suggests that NCLB is not responsible for the shift of classroom time to reading and math. Curricula have also changed in similar ways in schools that enroll mostly white and mostly minority students. Rural schools, however, have shifted time to English and reading substantially

It would also be expected that new teachers would be influenced by current expectations and pressures to emphasize English and math, whereas veteran teachers would more likely maintain teaching priorities from their early days in education. The study found the reverse is true, with newer teachers providing a broader curriculum.

Even though the k-12 curriculum has not narrowed consistently, and even though NCLB is not mainly responsible for the narrowing that has occurred, the curricula may still be too narrow to prepare young people for citizenship. Extracurricular activities such as music, drama, student journalism, and student government, are also too rare.

“The purpose of schools is not only to prepare workers, but also to create an active and egalitarian democracy,” Levine continued. “That mission requires widespread literacy and numeracy. But it also requires specific knowledge of history, government, social issues and current events as well as democratic and civic skills and values. We need to make sure these important areas of study are not lost in school curricula.”

With the new Administration and the next Congress set to discuss the reauthorization of NCLB, the report suggests stakeholders, lawmakers and citizens should give attention to the ways education has changed in the last several decades and consider the following alternative perspectives in the light of hard data about changes in the k-12 curriculum:

- **Back to basics.** Reading and math are fundamental and we need to focus our attention on these subjects until all students can read, write and calculate.
- **The liberal arts.** Education today is all about outcomes, and it overlooks the intrinsic value of subjects like history, fine arts, natural sciences, foreign languages and current events.
- **Cultural literacy.** Studying history, natural science, social science and foreign cultures enhances one’s literacy, and the collective de-emphasis on these subjects is why reading scores are flat, despite increased time devoted to reading/language arts.
- **Civic mission.** The purpose of schools is not (only) to prepare workers, but also to create an active and egalitarian democracy.

***CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement)** conducts and promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. A part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University, CIRCLE has received funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, Carnegie Corporation of New York and several other foundations. The curriculum report, “Narrowing at the Base,” was funded by the Ford Foundation.*

***The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service**, a national leader in civic engagement, prepares students from all fields of Tufts University to become engaged public citizens and community leaders.*

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