

HAS "NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND" NARROWED SCHOOL CURRICULA?

A new CIRCLE report shows that 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. 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.

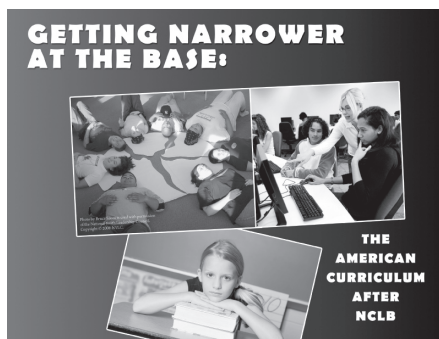
In grades one through five, the curriculum has narrowed over the last ten years, with more time devoted to reading and math and less to science, arts, and social studies. These declines, though, began in the 1990s before the passage of NCLB. The trends are the same in private and public schools and in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

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"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. The datasets employed met the following criteria:

(a) collected regularly over time and (b) collected from teachers and/or students as well as district leaders and parents. 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.



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Tufts
UNIVERSITY

Jonathan M. Tisch
College of Citizenship
and Public Service

WINTER 2009

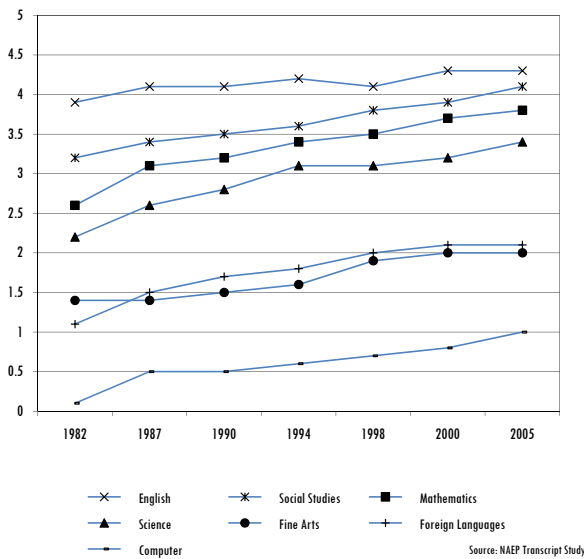
THE RESEARCH ROUNDUP COLUMN HIGHLIGHTS RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS COMMISSIONED OR GENERATED BY CIRCLE. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN UPDATE ON NEW CIRCLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS FACT SHEETS, RESEARCH ARTICLES, RESEARCH ABSTRACTS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND DATASETS.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS STUDYING MORE DIVERSE SUBJECTS

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. Using the NAEP Transcript Study, CIRCLE found that 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 report cautions that one major limitation of the NAEP dataset is that it reports the credits earned by students who have graduated

Graph 1: Average Number of Credits Earned by High School Graduates



from high school. As a result, students who do not graduate from high school are omitted. There is no precise count of high school dropouts nationally, but estimates run as high as 29 percent of those who enter ninth grade. The authors note that, "if the curriculum broadens only for students who make it all the way through high school, then it never broadens for some."

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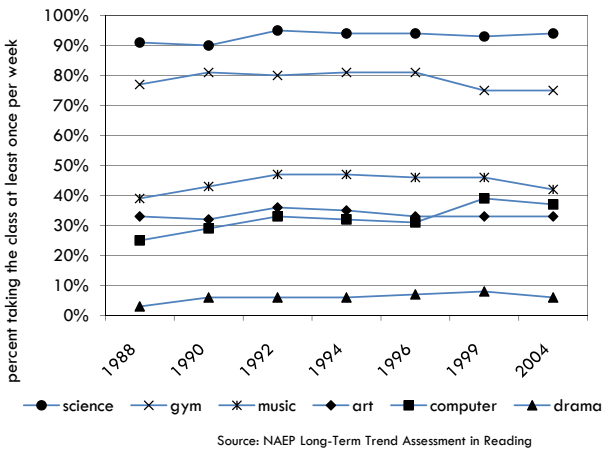
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NO EVIDENCE OF CURRICULAR CHANGE AT THE MIDDLE SCHOOL LEVEL

The curriculum for grades 6-8 (middle school) has not been much affected by the narrowing problem. Using the supplemental survey administered with the NAEP Reading Assessment at age 13 (typically, eighth grade), the CIRCLE analysis did not find dramatic changes in the “special” courses that students take (see graph 2).

Graph 2: NAEP-Designated “Special” Classes at Age 13



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FINDINGS

According to the report, there has been some curriculum narrowing in elementary school, but mostly at first grade. CIRCLE’s independent analysis of the U.S. Department of Education’s Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) data found an overall decline in attention to the liberal arts subjects of natural science and social studies/history.

The changes were greatest in the first grade (shown in graph 3). First-graders spent more than two hours more per week on the main academic subjects in 2003-4 than their predecessors had spent in 1987-8. The biggest contribution to that change was an extra 96 minutes per week of English in the first grade. Time spent on social studies declined by about 12 minutes.

The report cautions that merely comparing 1987 and 2004 conceals a more complex pattern in the intervening years. Time devoted by teachers to all four major academic subjects—English, mathematics, social studies, and science—first rose between 1987-8 and 1993-4. This was a period in which the academic curriculum was generally tightened, and standards and high-stakes tests were widely introduced. Social studies and science received more, not less, time during the elementary years as a whole. However, between 1993-4 and 2003-4, while time devoted to reading

and mathematics expanded in all grades, time allocated by teachers to social studies and science generally shrank. This trend began before the passage of NCLB and continued thereafter. As a result, time allocated to social studies and science in 2003-4 was slightly below where it had been in the mid-1980s. The authors hypothesize that increased attention to academic achievement first helped social studies and science; but then a tighter focus on reading and mathematics cut into time for these subjects. Moreover, the narrowing trend began before NCLB and affects private schools just as much as public schools. Thus the cause is probably not NCLB but rather a combination of parents’ and teachers’ priorities, textbooks, state laws, local policies, etc.

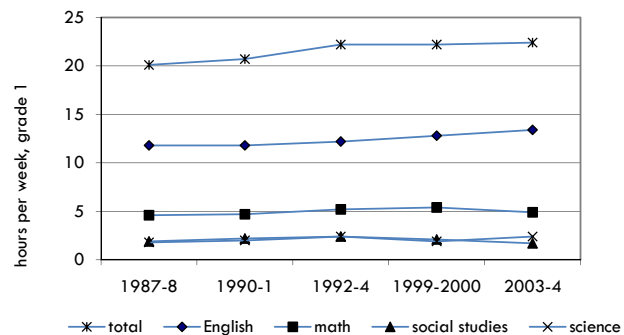
STILL, BROADER CURRICULUM NEEDED TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR CITIZENSHIP

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.”

LEVINE NOTES, “IN A DEMOCRACY, WHAT STUDENTS LEARN IS NOT A MATTER THAT CAN BE LEFT TO THE TECHNICAL EXPERTS WHO WRITE TESTS. IT IS AN ISSUE OF VALUES THAT SHOULD BE PUBLICLY DELIBERATED USING THE BEST AVAILABLE EMPIRICAL DATA.”

Graph 3: Time Allocated to Four Major Subjects in Public Schools, First Grade



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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. Levine notes, "In a democracy, what students learn is not a matter that can be left to the technical experts who write tests. It is an issue of values that should be publicly deliberated using the best available empirical data."

RECOMMENDATIONS

CIRCLE recommends that all stakeholders—including legislators, educational administrators, teachers, parents, and students themselves—give critical attention to the ways that the American curriculum has changed since the 1980s and 1990s. Citizens may wish to consider the following positions:

1. Back to basics. Reading and math are fundamental. Performance in these subjects is inadequate for the whole population and very unequal. We need to focus our attention on these subjects until all students can read, write, and calculate. The trends toward more reading and math in

elementary education are desirable.

2. The liberal arts. Education today is too instrumental. It is all about outcomes, especially economic outcomes. It overlooks the intrinsic value of subjects like history, fine arts, natural sciences, foreign languages, and current events.

3. Cultural literacy. The only way to be literate is to have a base of facts, concepts, and vocabulary. We obtain that base best by studying history, natural science, social science, and foreign cultures. The trends shown in this report indicate that we are failing to emphasize cultural literacy in the early years; and that is why reading scores are flat despite increased time devoted to reading/language arts.

4. Civic mission. The purpose of schools is not (only) to prepare workers, but also to create an active and egalitarian democracy. That mission requires widespread literacy and numeracy. But it also requires specific knowledge of history, government, social issues, and current events. We are losing those elements of the curriculum.

This discussion should be based on reliable information. Thus it is important for the federal government to collect and disseminate detailed data about the courses, extracurricular activities, and other opportunities that our students receive at all ages and grade levels.