

# Curriculum and Teaching in Adventist Schools

*Results of the Third North American  
Division Teacher Poll*

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eventh-day Adventists operate a highly organized parochial school system. The church's educational structure—frequently praised by administrators of other church schools—allows for greater coordination, centralized planning, and efficiency in curriculum development.

Although curriculum is *planned* at the union and division levels, curriculum *happens* when teachers in individual classrooms make decisions about instruction.

Therefore, to make instruction more effective, the church must solicit teacher input and reaction.

What do we know about the views and practices of classroom teachers? The North American Division Office of Education commissioned Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, to conduct a series of surveys for elementary and senior academy teachers.

These studies, known as the Profile surveys, are conducted in the spring of every other year. One out of every six teachers throughout the entire North American Division is included in a systematic random sample. In Profile '91, more than a thousand K-12 teachers and conference supervisors participated—with a return rate exceeding 80 percent.

Through random sampling, the Profile surveys secure feedback from the *total* population of teachers rather than from vocal or visible subgroups. Teach-

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ers share their thoughts in confidence on paper in ways they may not during an actual visit.

### Significance of Teacher Surveys

At times teachers wonder whether filling out questionnaires is worth the time and effort. For Profile surveys, the answer is definitely "yes." The surveys play an important role in curriculum planning at the conference, union, and division levels. Teachers are surveyed to secure the following information:

- unmet teaching needs
- extent of implementation
- satisfaction with materials
- curriculum awareness.

Profile survey results have helped to shape a number of decisions about classroom materials. These include choice of subject area focus, scheduling of curriculum development workshops, and revision of materials. As a result, the North American Division has developed materials for small schools and secondary Bible.

Results from three cycles—Profiles '87, '89, and '91—help to track trends over time. For example, improved ratings have followed the introduction of such materials as the Life Series readers, science books for grades 1-4, and *Art Works*. The Profiles have also analyzed secondary curriculum guide usage, with the aim of arriving at a format that will make the guides more useful to senior academy teachers.

The Profile surveys help establish curriculum-development priorities in the North American Division. They also monitor the effectiveness of curriculum delivery throughout the field. The excellent return rate (averaging 80 percent on all three cycles) underscores the teachers' willingness to participate in curriculum decisions.

### Profiles of the Respondents

The Profile surveys are sent to a random sample of K-12 teachers employed by the North American Division. The 1991 results mirrored Profile '87 and '89 in many ways. Teaching experience among elementary and junior academy teachers averaged 14.4 years, an increase of about two years from a 1987 survey. Just under half of the teachers held a master's degree; an additional quarter were working on an advanced degree. Most of the 525 elementary teachers worked in self-con-

tained classrooms (77 percent); only 18 percent were departmentalized. Ninety percent of the elementary teachers were at least 30 years of age or older, few were beginning teachers.

Boarding-school teachers comprised 57 percent of the senior academy sample, while teachers in day schools accounted for 43 percent. The secondary section of Profile '91 concentrated on curriculum guide usage by these teachers.

The nearly 100 NAD conference superintendents and associates were also surveyed. Only three of the conference respondents had an exclusively secondary orientation; most had elementary or K-12 assignments.

### Problem Areas in Elementary Teaching

Teachers were given a list of classroom problems and were asked to identify which of the problems affected them. The proportion of teachers indicating that certain areas were definitely or somewhat of a problem is included in Table 1.

### Teaching Support Services

The North American Division has invested heavily to develop textbooks and other materials. The survey sought to measure the effectiveness of these products, which depends in part upon the use teachers make of them. How extensively are the materials being distributed and used by teachers?

Do conference and academy administrators receive sufficient orientation on the materials to provide the kind of support teachers need when trying new approaches? Personnel at these levels are key in determining curricular success.

Survey research indicated that on-going coaching is by far the most effective way to institute and maintain curriculum change at the classroom level. However, only 10 percent of conference superintendents and associates said that they had adequate time to assist and observe teachers.

Teachers were asked to rate five ideas for helping teachers develop professionally when conference personnel are available. Results appear in Table 2.

Conference personnel responses largely paralleled those of the teachers. However, conference superintendents and associates gave the top rating (88 percent) to the mentoring system, compared to teachers, who rated it second (48 percent). Teachers favored teacher exchange networks (72 percent), and saw as less beneficial to "utilize the expertise of college or retired teachers."

### Academy Teacher Use of Curriculum Guides

Senior academy teachers were told that "The North American Division is preparing curriculum guides for academy teachers in a number of teaching areas.

"First," the survey form said, "we need to know if you've used any curriculum guides this year." (The survey was conducted in March and April.) Sixty percent of academy teachers said they had used the guides, while 40 percent said that they had not used them. Teachers were then asked to tell how they used the guides. (See Table 3.)

Elementary teachers and conference personnel responded similarly to academy teachers in their comments about curriculum guides. Both groups found curriculum guides most useful at the *beginning of the year or as an occasional benchmark* rather than a comprehensive document.

This leads to questions about the format of the curriculum guides. Are curriculum guides prepared in the most usable form? Do the guides attempt to serve too many purposes? The North American Division Curriculum Committee has voted to study the matter in more detail.

Perhaps curriculum preparers should compile more than one document. A few pages could serve as the "occasional

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# What do we know about the views and practices of classroom teachers?

benchmark.” This would give teachers a reference point for content to be covered. A separate resource manual could provide specific ideas and concrete plans for teaching.

## Subject Areas Most Needing Revision

Elementary teachers were asked which subject “needs the most attention as the North American Division sets an agenda for the selection and/or development of curriculum materials over the next five years.”

The 525 elementary teachers chose, in descending order, science and health (192 votes), Bible (72 votes), English/language arts (41 votes), reading (39 votes), social studies (36 votes), music (24 votes), mathematics (23 votes), and handwriting (2 votes) as areas needing revision.

## Ratings of Elementary Textbooks

Table 4 summarizes which subjects teachers prefer to teach. Reading and handwriting received the most favorable ratings, closely followed by mathematics.

The Life reading series is a success story, as shown by the favorable ratings that followed adoption of the series. However, a quarter of teachers using the readers complained that the books were not sturdy enough to withstand long-term use. Classroom management of the reading series can be a problem in small schools. However, the Southern Union’s Adventist Reading Management System (ARMS) has helped to solve this problem.

The science/health curriculum was seen as the area of greatest concern by teachers of grades 5 to 8. More than 60

percent of the teachers using the series reported “major problems,” most notably in the inadequate teacher helps. Ratings of the grades 1-4 science program were considerably more favorable. Teachers using non-Adventist science texts expressed concern about the lack of Christ-centeredness in the materials.

The elementary Bible curriculum has for years been given mediocre ratings by teachers. However, more than 70 percent of the teachers rated as excellent the recently revised Bible program for 7th and 8th graders.

Art is probably the most neglected area of the curriculum. In prior Profile ratings, only 7 to 9 percent of teachers rated art materials as excellent. This year the new *Art Works* program produced “excellent” responses by nearly 50 percent of respondents, once again demonstrating the impact of curriculum development on improved teacher ratings.

Music still receives poor ratings. Most teachers currently use their own materials, but only seven teachers rate their programs as excellent. The NAD unions are presently cooperating to assemble a music program. Frieda Hoffer, associate director of education at the Columbia Union, is leading out in this venture.

Social studies, English, and mathematics texts have received varying ratings by teachers over the past six years. The use of commercial materials from large publishing houses causes dissatisfaction because of the lack of Christ-centeredness in the textbooks. However, teachers have not indicated other major problems with such materials. Social studies ratings by teachers have climbed; English and mathematics have remained constant or declined slightly.

## Ratings of Other Curriculum Documents

Much curriculum development activity takes place at the union conference level. Increasingly, unions are collaborating in their curriculum activities. The Southern Union’s ARMS Program is now used extensively throughout the division, as are other materials such as North Pacific’s Skill Pac and Atlantic’s *Native American* units.

The Profile questionnaire asked teachers to grade from “A” to “F” 21 sets of widely used curriculum materials.

The *Small School Survival Guide*

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**Table 2**  
**Suggestions for Receiving Expert Feedback**  
**Elementary / Junior Academy Teachers**  
**Top two choices from five alternatives**  
**N = 525**

Suggestion	%
"Teacher exchange networks so teachers within a given region can regularly exchange ideas"	72%
"A conference mentoring system where experienced teachers can help new teachers"	48%
"A peer coaching plan hiring substitutes to free teachers for collaboration"	41%
"Utilize the expertise of retired educators"	18%
"Enlist the support of college or university faculty in assisting beginning teachers"	7%

COMMENT:  
 Mentoring, peer coaching, and teacher exchange networks are popular with both conference personnel and teachers. Are there examples in the field of some of these proposals which are actually working? Is this the time for some pilot projects?

received top ratings, with 84 percent of teachers giving it an "A" or a "B." This was followed by *Earth: Origin and Early History* (79 percent), *A Reason for Writing* (78 percent), Bible Activities Series E (76 percent), and ARMS (71 percent).

**Recommendations**

1. In their comments, NAD educators called for an overarching framework to give meaning and purpose to instruction. We need to determine the best format for communicating such a framework.

*Recommendation:* The NADCC should develop coherent and concise scope and sequence charts to give guidance to teaching and curriculum planning.

2. Curriculum development is not just dispensing good materials that teachers adopt passively. Providing teachers with the necessary resources, skills, and convictions to use curriculum properly is a complex but necessary endeavor.

*Recommendation:* The NADCC, unions, and colleges should collaborate in designing in-service workshop and exchange activities for teachers. Much more linkage and professional cooperation is needed.

3. The standard procedure of having a single, itinerant supervisor making

**Table 3**  
**Actual and Ideal Uses for Curriculum Guides**  
**By Senior Elementary Teachers**  
**(N = 250)**

Description of Usage	How I used the guides	How they should be used
"As an occasional reference for selecting textbooks and other curriculum materials"	122	114
"As a beginning-of-the year reference point to make sure you are covering the right content"	149	144
"Every week as a weekly planning guide"	25	68
"Every day in preparing specific lesson plans"	5	24
Other comments [supplied by respondent]	19	18

one or two trips a year to visit teachers is outdated and ineffectual.

*Recommendation:* Effective teaching occurs through a systematic and *on-going* program of coaching, mentoring, networking, and peer support.

4. We need to rethink the entire concept of curriculum guides prior to further funding. Teachers do need guidelines, but the current format is too cumbersome to be readily usable and too general to provide specific day-to-day guidance.

Recommendation: The NADCC

should restudy the format and concept of the curriculum guide. The resulting documents should be brief, flexible, and usable. Perhaps a pilot project would be helpful.

**Conclusion**

Teachers and students spend much of their school time interacting with curriculum materials. Adventist schools need high-level quality materials that will enable teachers to teach better and learners to learn more effectively.

The Profile surveys will help to de-

termine what goes on "behind the classroom door." They are giving teachers more of a voice in the curriculum decisions that affect their classrooms. This should result in higher satisfaction and greater productivity by Adventist elementary and secondary teachers in the North American Division. ✍

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**Table 4**  
**Adequacy of Textbooks in Various Subject Areas**  
**NAD Elementary/Junior Academy Teachers 1987 - 1991**

	1987				1989				1991			
	No.	Excel %	Minor Probl %	Major Probl %	No.	Excel %	Minor Probl %	Major Probl %	No.	Excel %	Minor Probl %	Major Probl %
Bible	194	38	41	21	389	28	50	22	350	47	45	8
Reading	185	74	24	2	376	65	33	2	404	51	43	6
Science /Health	194	43	35	22	360	39	40	22	356	28	44	28
Math	171	76	23	1	372	41	58	0	347	57	39	4
Soc Stud	164	27	43	30	317	34	42	23	308	51	43	6
English	116	43	47	10	325	48	46	7	305	36	53	11
Hand-writing	172	63	33	4	315	55	40	5	367	61	35	4
Spelling	164	37	48	15	319	47	46	8	367	47	48	5
Music	161	14	34	52	171	7	32	61	98	20	49	31
Art	231	7	47	46	299	9	40	51	161	35	52	13

Comments: The new grade 7 - 8 grade Bible program positively affected the ratings in 1991. Slow-rising dissatisfaction in reading should be noted. Music and Art are rating higher; Art Works positively affected ratings. A preponderance of teachers (70) are using their own teacher-made materials for music but only seven of these teachers rate their programs as excellent.