Curriculum and Teaching in Adventist Elementary and Secondary Schools

The Fourth Biennial Poll of North American Division Educators

BY PAUL S. BRANTLEY AND LARRY BURTON

eventh-day Adventists probably operate the most highly organized parochial school system of any denomination in North America. The North American Division's curriculum development structure is praised by leaders of other systems for its efficiency.

Care must be taken, however, to ensure that in the process of curriculum delivery, teachers' voices are clearly heard. Although curriculum is largely *planned* at union and division levels, curriculum *happens* when individual teachers make decisions about instruction. What do we know about the views and practices of NAD classroom teachers?

Through random sampling, the Profile surveys obtain feedback from the *total* spectrum of K-12 educators, rather than from vocal or visible subgroups. Teachers share, in confidence, their thoughts on paper in ways they might not during face-to-face discussion.

The Profile surveys are conducted every other spring. One in six K-12 teachers throughout the North American Division is sampled randomly to examine educators' concerns in the following areas:

- teaching
- technology
- testing
- textbooks

Profile '93 represents the fourth in a series of surveys dating back to 1987. A growing bank of background data makes it possible to observe *trends* in curriculum usage. Comparing information from the classroom, conference, union, and division levels helps determine the extent to which the various levels are "on the same wavelength" in trying to provide the best education for each pupil.

Picture Removed

NAD Educators Participating in Profile '93

Respondents were sampled from the entire listing of elementary/junior academy and senior academy teachers employed by the North American Division during 1993.

Of the 977 educators selected, 772 returned their mailed questionnaires, a response rate of nearly 80 percent—a very high return for mailed surveys. The percentage was comparable to returns from the past three biennial surveys in the Profile series.

Elementary/Junior Academy Teachers

The average age of the 451 elementary teachers was about 40 (only 10 percent of the teachers were in their twenties). The average teacher had 15 years' teaching experience, considerably more than in the Profile '87 poll. Half the teachers taught in multigrade classrooms (three or more grades), with nearly a third teaching in one- or two-teacher schools.

Senior Academy Teachers

Slightly more than half of the 203 respondents in this group taught at day academies, the rest at boarding schools. Nearly a third (30 percent) of the academy teachers were at least 50 years of age. The average teacher had taught 16 years—half of that time at his or her present school. The 203 academy teachers responding to the systematic random sample included 24 science teachers, 26 English teachers, and 20 Bible teachers. Smaller numbers of teachers indicated other fields.

Conference Personnel and NAD Curriculum Committee

Polling included the total population of conference educational superintendents and associates, as well as North American Division Curriculum Committee (NADCC) members. The planners of the division-wide curriculum projects include North American Division education directors, union conference curriculum personnel, and a representative from each NAD SDA college. Comparing the responses of teachers, conference personnel, and the NADCC affords a unique opportunity to examine the curriculum delivery system from a variety of perspectives—from "committee to classroom."

Profile '93 Results

Profile '93 collected data in the four broad areas mentioned above: teaching, testing, technology, and textbooks. Such topics as in-service and professional development and feedback about curriculum supplements were included under one of the four broad areas. The scope of Profile surveys is limited to curriculum and teaching concerns and does not include such teacher/administrative issues as pay and tenure. At appropriate times, results from Profile '93 will be compared with those from the three prior surveys.

Concerns About Teaching

Students With Special Needs. The biggest concern of elementary teachers (80 percent) and academy teachers (76 percent) was having more students with special needs and problems in their classrooms, figures identical to the Profile '91 results. More than 95 percent of conference administrators and NADCC members concurred with K-12 teachers by rating "more students with special needs and problems" as presenting difficulties for teachers. Later in the questionnaire, when all groups were asked to select four workshop topics of interest from a possible list of 16, "coping with students with special needs and learning prob-

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lems" again surfaced at the top of the list.

This concern was consistent across demographic levels except for teachers in their twenties, who perhaps had not taught long enough to discern changing demographic trends. Boarding academy teachers were slightly more likely to report the phenomenon than day academy teachers. Could this be caused by an increasingly diverse and dysfunctional society that sends students away to school with unprecedented academic and personal problems? Adventist educators are challenged to find more effective ways of ensuring that "all thy children shall be taught of the Lord."

Networking With Peers. The second greatest concern was "insufficient occa-

sions to network with peers." Secondary teachers felt this need a little more keenly (77 percent) than did elementary teachers (74 percent). However, the figure for elementary teachers in one- and two-teacher schools was 81 percent. A 1991 study by Brantley and Freed indicated that lack of networking is also seen as a problem at the college level.

By contrast, only 30 percent of conference personnel and 33 percent of the NADCC felt that networking with *their* peers was insufficient. In no other portion of the survey was there such a discrepancy between groups.

Is the isolation of the classroom the reason many teachers want to move to larger schools, to administrative appointments, or to other professions? Administrators and planners may be greatly underestimating the importance of social and professional networking among teachers.

One of the most effective ways to encourage collegiality is through teacher exchange groups in which teachers periodically come together to share ideas. All respondent categories agreed on the plausibility of using teacher support groups to supplement conventions and workshops.

Other Teaching Concerns. "Implementing spiritual concepts into teaching" is of perennial interest to educators, as is "learning up-to-date teaching strategies." "Using computers and technology in teaching" surfaced as a preferred topic for in-service workshops —second only to "coping with students with special needs."

In addition to classroom concerns, teaching's human side can have an impact upon classroom effectiveness. Although absent in Profile '93, prior surveys pointed to stress factors and overwork in teaching. In Profile '93, academy boarding school teachers reported spending more time helping their students after hours (80 percent) than did day academy teachers (66 percent) or elementary teachers (64 percent). When

asked about the respect teachers receive from their constituencies, three-quarters of the teachers answered "definitely yes" or "yes, somewhat." Older teachers perceived more respect from constituents than younger teachers.

Secondary teachers felt they had more control over their curriculum than did elementary teachers. Elementary teachers in departmental arrangements (primarily those teaching specialized subject areas) reported a greater sense of curriculum control than did teachers in self-contained classrooms.

Concerns About Testing

Virtually all (99 percent) NAD K-12 teachers responding to Profile '93 reported that their schools use the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. When asked when it is administered, almost all said in the fall, even if some also test in the spring. Elementary teachers expressed some reservations about testing first and second graders.

At least two-thirds of each group recognized that standardized tests are important to parents and school boards, but much lower percentages felt that teachers used the information in ways that benefited students. Nearly half of the academy teachers indicated that their schools had weak student-assessment programs.

Using a standard assessment device helps reveal system-wide strengths and weaknesses that would be difficult to pinpoint in any other way. However, the NADCC (and other responding groups to a lesser extent) felt that standardized tests fail to sample the full spectrum of student abilities. The groups also recognized the limitations of standardized tests in measuring important goals of SDA education.

Concerns About Technology

"Using computers and technology in teaching" surfaced as a preferred topic for in-service workshops—second only to "coping with students with special needs." This concern may indicate teachers' recognition that technology has become more than a frill and will affect students' lives in profound ways.

Technology has the potential of augmenting teachers' effectiveness and can

Profile '93 collected data in the four broad areas of teaching, testing, technology, and textbooks.

remove communication barriers between educators who are widely separated geographically. However, two immediate problems with technology are the initial cost and the training required to help educators use it to best advantage.

Educators were asked to indicate which types of technology were available to them. Nearly all had videocassettes; most had microcomputers. But few teachers had modems to tap into networks. Fewer still had speaker phones for total classroom communication, although the expense is negligible. Few of even the conference and NADCC staff possessed satellite read-out capability. Is it possible that even the ubiquitous telephone is not used to full
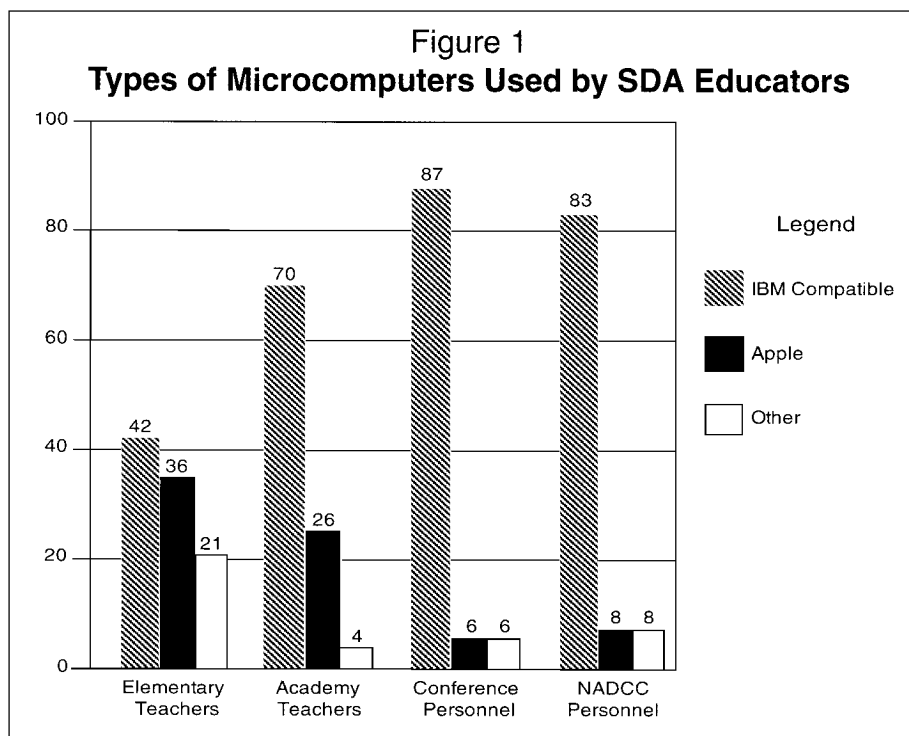
potential as a means of orientation, networking, and collaboration?

Two-thirds of elementary teachers and 43 percent of secondary teachers said they had microcomputers in their classrooms. Almost all academies had a specialized room for computers (93 percent). What is the computer of choice? IBM-compatible microcomputers were used by all groups, although 36 percent of elementary teachers also used Apples. Teachers in one- and two-room schools were more likely to own computers than those who taught in other schools.

Concerns About Textbooks and Curriculum Materials

Teachers and students spend a significant amount of classroom time using print and non-print materials. If these materials are defective, work becomes more tedious. Teachers were asked to rate the textbooks that they used during the 1992-1993 school year. In addition to the ratings they gave on the survey, teachers wrote in hundreds of comments regarding specific aspects of textbooks and curriculum materials that concerned them.

Secondary teachers were not surveyed about textbooks. In our academies, with the possible exception of Bible, class textbook selection is often left to the dis-

Figure 1
Types of Microcomputers Used by SDA Educators

Legend: IBM Compatible, Apple, Other

Elementary Teachers: IBM Compatible 42, Apple 36, Other 21
Academy Teachers: IBM Compatible 70, Apple 26, Other 4
Conference Personnel: IBM Compatible 87, Apple 6, Other 6
NADCC Personnel: IBM Compatible 83, Apple 8, Other 8
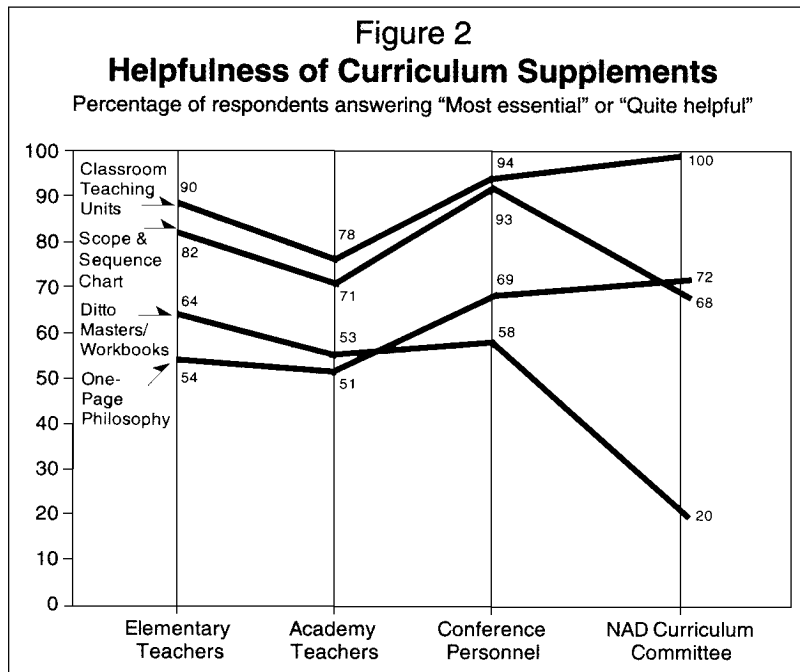
cretion of the individual school or teachers.

Textbook Ratings. Some texts are developed by the church, while others are commercially prepared. By and large, teachers critiqued commercial books as "not Christ-centered." The desire to produce a Christian approach to learning has motivated our church to invest heavily in developing our own textbooks and workbooks.

Of all the elementary textbooks developed by the SDA system, the *A Child's World* kindergarten curriculum received the highest ratings, followed by *Small School Spelling, Life Series Reading, Small School English Manual*, Bible 1-4 (composite), Bible 5-8 (composite, new and old series), Artworks Handbook, Health/Science 1-4 (composite), and Health/Science 5-8 (composite, new and old series). Newly revised series typically received higher ratings than older series.

Sources of Concerns. A key problem experienced by teachers is textbooks with inadequate teacher helps. Teaching is a busy, stressful activity, and teachers rely upon aids to help them move through their subjects. A second area of concern was difficulty in testing. Teachers have problems identifying appropriate forms of assessments for the textbook programs they use. Other concerns such as lack of durability, readability, expense, and inappropriate content were seen as less problematic.

Follow-up and Training. A sizable body of research indicates that teachers are more likely to be effective if they receive training in the appropriate use of materials and have ongoing opportunities for coaching as they use the materials in the classroom. Unfortunately, 35 to 45 percent of teachers said they had little or no training in use of the materials, and 80 percent reported no follow-up coaching.

Perhaps strategies for teacher in-ser-

Figure 2
Helpfulness of Curriculum Supplements
Percentage of respondents answering "Most essential" or "Quite helpful"

The biggest concern of elementary and academy teachers was having more students with special needs and problems in their classrooms.

vice need to be re-examined. Although most groups felt that beginning-of-the-year teachers' conventions have merit, the educators expressed an openness to other options such as periodic workshops, monthly teacher-exchange groups, summer workshops, and orientation videotapes. Curiously, teachers indicated some reluctance about having someone come to their classrooms to explain the materials.

Helpful Curriculum Supplements. In rating selected curriculum supplements, elementary teachers, secondary teachers, and conference administrators agreed on the three supplements that were "most essential" or "quite helpful":

1. Creative, classroom-ready teaching

units that include concrete ideas for supplementing textbook instruction.

2. A scope and sequence chart that describes the kinds of outcomes expected at each teaching area or level.

3. Correlation charts that relate desired concepts to relevant portions of a variety of textbooks.

Conference administrators and NADCC members included "a set of common goals for all SDA schools" in their top three choices.

All responding groups seemed to view positively the alternatives offered, the most highly rated of which are shown in Figure 2. Adding the category "of some use" to the categories "most essential" and "quite helpful," meant that even the one-page philosophical statement was perceived favorably by at least 90 percent of all responding groups. As a direct result of the Profile series, the NADCC is presently trying to identify more helpful alternatives to the cumbersome curriculum guide.

Conclusion

The North American Division and union offices of education need to know how curriculum is received "behind the classroom door." The Profile survey is one important way to know how teachers feel about the curriculum they use within the real world of their classrooms. Profile survey results have been used (and are being used) to make important decisions in the development of effective resources for Adventist schools. @

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