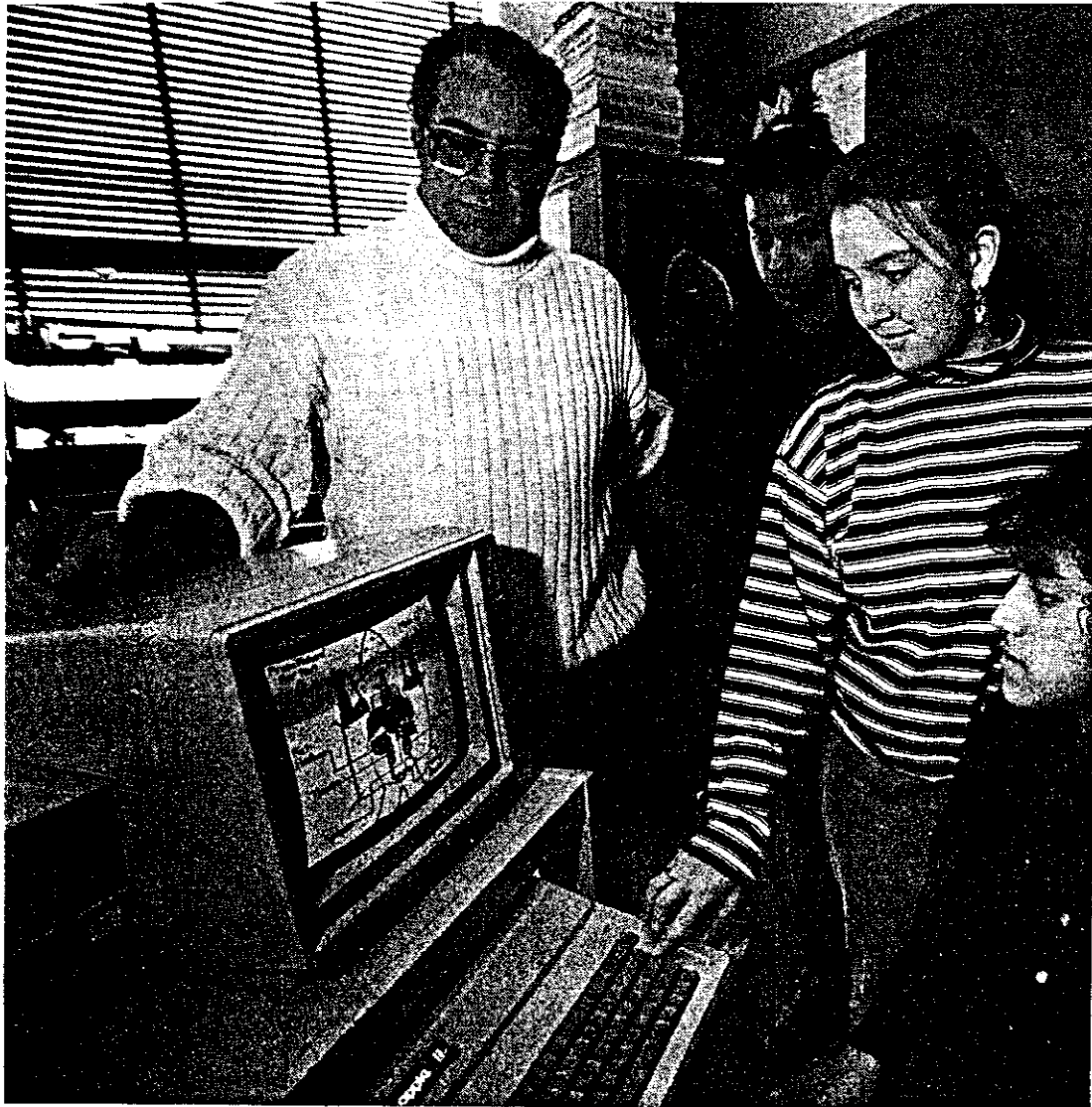


LEARNING

THE BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE • MARCH 21, 1993

Political agendas in the classroom

Teachers cast critical eye on curriculum materials with a motive



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / YUNGH KIM

Dracut High School teacher Joe Lapiana (left) works with biology students using a computer image to dissect a frog.

By Margaret Combs
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

For three decades now, outside groups have brought their personal agendas into America's classrooms. Since the shock of Sputnik, scientists, economists and business people have developed and financed teaching aids for use in public schools: Their motives range from accelerating America in the space race to improving corporate image and, more recently, to creating a thinking labor force.

Now appears yet another purpose behind corporate-developed teaching aids. A growing number of corporations and other groups are knocking on teachers' doors not only with economic agendas but with potent social and political messages as well.

Unlike the simple nutrition charts and teacher handouts of the past, these recent curriculums are sophisticated, multimedia learning packages designed to counter-balance media hype on volatile social issues such as smoking, animal rights and solid waste.

According to Dick Aieta, social studies department head at Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School in Hamilton, the sponsors of these materials rarely state what their agenda is, but, according to him, the messages are clear.

As an example, Aieta pulls out a box from his office files containing a curriculum produced by Philip Morris Companies Inc., one of the nation's largest cigarette manufacturers. Titled "The Bill of Rights: Protecting Our Liberty" (released in 1991) the program has, among its teaching materials, a game called "Your Rights May Be in Jeopardy."

"Our thinking was that what they are doing was to get people to associate First Amendment freedoms with the freedom to smoke," says Aieta.

Philip Morris spokesman Posi Disesa

Teachers cast critical eye on

curriculums with political agendas

■ CURRICULUMS

Continued from Page 42

denied in a phone interview that the program was intended to promote smokers' rights. He said the curriculum was to be used "strictly as an educational support program."

Exhibit rejected

Aieta and his colleagues, however, evaluated it differently. When the Massachusetts Council for Social Studies was asked by Philip Morris to co-sponsor an exhibit of Bill of Rights replicas, the council declined. Says Aieta: "We didn't sign off on it. People were sensing the agenda."

Neither end of the political or social spectrum holds a monopoly on these new curriculums. For example, also on Aieta's desk is a packet by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence in Washington called "Guns and the Constitution."

Through a series of activities, the curriculum encourages students to reexamine the meaning and relevance of the Second Amendment right to bear arms.

"You could say there's a big struggle in this country going on for the minds and values of all citizens," says Fred Andelman, director of professional development at the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

"One of the arenas that struggle takes place is in the public schools. So everybody and their uncles and cousins have curriculums that deal with their own agendas."

No state curriculum

The potential of agenda-based curriculums to influence the thinking of students is theoretically greater in a state such as Massachusetts that

does not have a state-controlled curriculum than in states such as California and Texas that do.

Here, outside organizations can mail teaching aids and lesson plans directly to teachers. They, in turn, may request to have them evaluated by councils or local boards but are not required to do so.

Also affecting these curriculums are the current budget constraints on schools. For lack of funding for materials and training, teachers may be particularly prone to accepting corporate-sponsored learning materials that usually are free.

Teachers, however, say they do not feel threatened or overpowered by these agenda-associated materials. For one thing, they believe the state's district-by-district control over curriculum makes it less likely political agendas ever will gather widespread momentum. They also say they have enough expertise to recognize and screen out blatant bias when necessary.

Teachers are sensitive to messages

Seventh-grade science teacher Lisa Sequeira at the Walsh Middle School in Framingham says multicultural awareness training alone has equipped her and her colleagues with a sensitivity to all forms of bias and subliminal messages.

"We are well aware of how language can be used," she says, "and that students must be given information in an appropriate way so they can make healthy decisions themselves."

Rather than feeling manipulated by these curriculums, Sequeira and other teachers say they actually feel relieved to have them.

Sequeira believes the Massachu-

setts Society for Medical Research provided teachers with a "tremendous service" when it developed "People and Animals: United for Health," a comprehensive curriculum designed for middle- and high-school students about medical advances resulting from research on laboratory animals.

The ten-unit program outlines why specific animals are used in research, how the animals are housed and cared for and what legislation exists to govern animal use and prevent abuse.

Balancing the other side

Sequeira says her science students already had ample exposure to animal rights advocates through news reports, but, until getting the society's curriculum, she was hard pressed to balance their knowledge with any support for medical research.

"The MSMR curriculum provides the teacher with a broader spectrum to draw from," says Sequeira, who last year lent the material to the school's English class for a debate on animal rights. "As a teacher, it is my responsibility to provide students with as much information as I can about a very volatile issue."

Invaluable program

Also using the society's curriculum is Dracut High School science teacher Joseph Lapiana, who finds the program invaluable in his biology classes. Lapiana feels the wealth of biomedical knowledge provided through the program outweighs any negatives.

"The agenda is there, no question," says Lapiana. "But the facts are even more important, and the

facts are there, clearly."

Similar sentiment comes from teachers using other agenda-associated curriculums. Rather than see them as insidious forms of infiltration, some teachers find these curriculums useful for teaching students how to judge critically and evaluate issues for themselves.

Paula Jones, a seventh- and eighth-grade social studies teacher at Buker Middle School in Hamilton, uses a curriculum developed by Kraft General Foods called "Solid Thinking About Solid Waste."

She concedes Kraft has "some-what of a bias that plastic is not the worst material in the world and that companies have legal liabilities to make sure food is packaged safely." But she also believes the curriculum allows students opportunities to evaluate why packaging methods are used and make up their own minds as to which are necessary.

Kraft gives no answers

According to Deborah Becker, vice president of environmental policy at Kraft, more than half the curriculum is devoted to community research and surveying skills so students can come to their own conclusions.

"We do not anywhere in the curriculum give them an answer," says Becker.

The kinds of decision-making skills encouraged in the Kraft curriculum are what Jones wants her students to learn.

"If people are going to make decisions about the environment," she says, "... then they have to be able to make a balanced decision."

Fodder for discussion

And even if some curriculums do not intend to provide opportunities for students to ask questions and evaluate political motives, they likely end up as fodder for those purposes anyway, according to Andelman at the Massachusetts Teachers Associ-

ation.

He says high schools are filled with courses in psychology and sociology that teach kids to understand propaganda, how ideas spread, how to identify subliminal messages and how to verify information.

"On the one hand, there are lots of groups trying to pedal their ideas throughout the schools," says Andelman. "But on the other hand, those materials - in the hands of skillful teachers - simply become grist for the mill. They can be used in a very creative way."

Whether the agendas are blatant or subliminal, teachers agree that curriculums with an agenda can be useful factual resources and even essential to balancing issues in the classroom.

In the interest of academic freedom, many teachers agree with Norwood High School science teacher Joyce Gleason who would rather see these programs flow freely into her office than see them restricted or censored.

Says Gleason unequivocally: "I want the decision in my hands."