

# *Is the American High School Serving Today's Youth?* \_\_\_\_\_

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At our request Paul Grim and Vernon Anderson, past and present chairmen of the ASCD Publications Committee, collected the following material based on statements from students and educators concerning the needs in secondary schools today. Both authors are associate professors of education—Vernon Anderson at the University of Connecticut and Paul Grim at the University of Minnesota.

*What do youth of today think are the most important functions of the high school?*

*In what ways is the modern high school best serving the needs of youth?*

*In what areas is the high school failing to make a satisfactory contribution?*

*What do principals, teachers, and leaders in secondary education feel are the most important problems which high schools must solve today?*

*What barriers or blocks prevent the solution of these problems?*

*What may be some possible solutions for the important problems facing our high schools?*

In planning the curriculum of a high school, the real interests and needs of the students are too frequently neglected. In order to determine what some high school youth believe are the most important functions of high schools today, how effectively high schools are serving these functions, and in what areas high schools are failing to make contributions, we have turned

directly to high school youth.<sup>1</sup> We selected students in five different high schools, distributed geographically to include one high school each in Connecticut, Minnesota, Missouri, California, and Oregon. These schools represented the typical range of high school curriculums, with the largest number of students in the college preparatory curriculum, the next largest in the general curriculum, followed by business, commercial, and other vocational areas. These students were asked to respond to the following items: "The five most important things I expect the high school to do for me include:" "The high school is helping me most in these five ways:" "The high school is helping me least in these five ways:" Returns were received from 271 students.

Most of these schools were in relatively large cities. One, however, was a suburban school in a rather small city.

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to express appreciation to the many contributors, including the students, who cooperated in this study. Many excellent contributions were not included because of lack of space. The writers wish to acknowledge the contribution of William Dreier, teaching assistant, University of Minnesota, for his valuable work in collecting and tabulating the data.

Perhaps results would have been different had we sampled high schools of variously representative sizes. Certainly the study does not presume to interpret what the high school youth in a very small or rural high school feels are his major problems. Nevertheless, we feel that the results do have some significance for all who are concerned with the problems of improving secondary education. Not only does it have implications for secondary schools, but also for teacher training institutions.

In order to compare these results with the opinions of authorities concerning modern secondary education, we asked similar questions of outstanding leaders in the field. In all, thirty-six school superintendents, high school principals, teachers, college presidents, and leaders in secondary education in colleges and universities responded. We asked these authorities: "What are the five most important problems which sec-

ondary educators must solve?" "What are the barriers or blocks to the solution of these problems?" "What are the possible solutions for the five most important problems which secondary educators must solve?"

#### THE OPINIONS OF YOUTH

##### What Do High School Youth Expect?

The most frequently appearing responses of students to the first item, listed in the order of frequency, are given below.

A majority of all the responding students indicated that vocational exploration and training were important functions which they expected the high school to render. They said, "The high school should help prepare me for an occupation," or, "The high school should help me choose a vocation." The second most frequently mentioned function of the high school was one which we have classified as human relations.

#### Important Things I Expect the High School To Do for Me

Number of Responses	Area	Typical Statements
157	Vocational Exploration and Training	"Help find what field interests me most"
117	Human Relations	"Help me get along with other people"
112	College Preparation	"Prepare me for college"
78	Social Development	"To help in my social adjustment"
75	Subject Matter	"Understanding of the studies I am taking"
66	Education	"To give me an all-round education"
64	Citizenship	"Help me to be a good citizen"
63	Study Habits and Skills	"Teach me better study habits"
46	Personality	"Develop my personality"
41	Friendships	"To make good friends"; "To learn to make more friends"
39	Character Traits	"To build my character"
38	World Problems	"To give me a better understanding of the world's problems"
38	Responsibility	"Teach me to take on responsibility and carry through with it"

Many students stated that "High school should give me experiences in learning how to cooperate and work with others." The third area was that of general college preparation. Fourth was the area of social development: "High school should help me learn how to meet people and how to conduct myself in a social situation"; "It should help me in taking part in social activities and in learning how to be socially at ease with others." Fifth, these students felt that the school should help them master important areas of subject matter. The sixth category was the rather general one of "education." Some typical responses were: "The high school should give me a broad education"; "It should help educate me for the future"; "It should help prepare me for life." Seventh, the important area of citizenship, was often expressed: "To teach me to practice good citizenship in and out of school." Some students felt that the high school should "Teach me how to proportion my time." Others emphasized that they should learn how to concentrate and study.

These youth felt that high school should help them develop pleasing personalities. "It should give me poise and self confidence." The tenth most frequently mentioned item dealt with friendships; a considerable number of students indicated that "High school should help me make and keep good friends." The students were concerned about character traits: "It should help me choose to do right things and to grow up properly."

The last area classified above was that of responsibility. These youth said, "High school should help me to hold responsibilities given to me," and "It

should teach me to develop a sense of dependability." These, then, were the thirteen most frequently appearing general classifications.

It is interesting to note that only fourteen students indicated the need for developing leadership in the high school. Only eleven mentioned the development of new interests. Twenty-four indicated that health was an important function of the high school. Fourteen mentioned athletics and sports. To develop more critical thinking was mentioned by twenty students. Twenty-seven felt that the high school should help them develop more effectively their skills in conversation.

#### **What Do Youth Believe They Get?**

The listing on the next page indicates responses to our second item.

Again, there was a wide distribution of scattered responses. Twenty-seven students, for example, indicated the area of clear thinking; twenty-six emphasized the importance of world affairs; twenty-one felt that the high school was helping very effectively in the general area of leadership; nineteen listed that the high school was serving to widen their interests; twenty-five students felt that the high school was helping them quite effectively in the area of physical health; thirteen indicated that it was serving general cultural needs; ten mentioned that it was serving them in the area of avocation and leisure time. Only four students indicated that they felt the high school was serving them very effectively in the general problem of counseling and guidance. The same number felt that the high school was serving them adequately in the area of homemaking.

## The High School Is Helping Me Most in These Ways

Number of Responses	Area	Typical Statements
141	Human Relations	"Teaching me to work with other people, even of other races"
104	Vocational Exploration and Training	"Giving me a view of many different occupations"; "Preparing me for an occupation"
99	Social Development	"To meet new people who come to this school"
79	Study Habits and Skills	"Training me in good study habits"
75	Subject Matter	"Giving me a general knowledge of many different subjects"
68	Personality Traits	"To depend on myself"; "To develop my personality"
63	Education and Knowledge	"Furthering me in my education"; "To get a good education"
62	Citizenship	"Teaching me about democracy and Americanism"; "Making good citizens"
60	College Preparation	"Giving me a knowledge of things I would need for a major in college"
47	Friendships	"Making good and lasting friends"
42	Responsibility	"To hold responsibility"
42	Character Traits	"Teaches me to be a good sport"; "Helping me to make the right choice"

## The High School Is Helping Me Least in These Ways

Number of Responses	Area	Typical Statements
119	Subject Matter	"No time for extra reading, music"; "Too much homework"
67	Vocational	"In planning for a later vocation"
54	Individual Attention	"Not enough individual attention given to students"; "Lack of teacher interest in pupil activities"
44	Study Habits	"Helps me least in how to study"
41	Social Development	"Not helping me socially"; "Too many social groups"
38	Basic Skills	"More knowledge of writing, spelling, and reading"
28	Human relations	"More racial, religious, social respect"
24	Sports and Athletics	"No interest for those not in sports"
23	Character Traits	"Not helping me morally"; "Little help in getting a good set of values"
20	Home and Family Life Education	"Homemaking—sewing and clothing"; "Sex instruction"
19	Guidance and Counseling	"Personal guidance"; "Finding my true abilities and talents"
19	Personality Development	"Development of personality and poise"; "Independence and self-confidence"

### How Are High Schools Failing Youth?

In what areas are the high schools of today most ineffective? In those studied, we found the twelve areas (on the preceding page) to be major ones in which students felt that the school was not effectively serving their needs.

A considerable number of students, sixty-one, failed to reply to this particular item: "How the high school is helping me least." Twice as many students left this question blank as compared to those who failed to respond to the first two general questions. Why did these students fail to reveal wherein they felt the high school was serving them least? Two possible assumptions seem in order. Perhaps these students might be rather well satisfied with the services of their high schools, since the data presented with the second question indicates satisfaction with the high school in a wide range of responses. Or does it mean that these students have not developed the habit of thinking critically about the program in which they are engaged?

### What Do These Facts Indicate?

Certain interpretations and conclusions may be drawn from the opinions of these students as expressed in reply to the three items. It is interesting to note that vocational exploration and training come first on the list of desirable functions and second in the *most* helpful areas, as well as second in the *least* helpful areas. The apparent inconsistency of the students' responses in the second and third listings, that is, in indicating that in the vocational area they were receiving most help and at the same time least help, may be clarified in part from a closer analysis of the

data. One hundred and four students affirmed that their high schools were serving them satisfactorily in the vocational area; sixty-seven indicated that they were being served inadequately in this field. Examination of individual students' replies reveals that these responses came from different students; this implies that twice as many felt satisfied with their schools' vocational offerings as those who were dissatisfied. However, when over twenty-five percent of the responding students indicate dissatisfaction with their schools' program in the important vocational area, some serious gaps are indicated.

Significant is the fact that students place a high value on receiving help from the high school on their personal problems, friendships, and personality and social development; on their ability to get along with others; on improving study habits and skills; and on developing civic responsibility. These objectives, emphasizing behavior changes, take their place beside the traditional subject matter learnings.

In the minds of a majority of these young people, their high school is not meeting their needs in home and family life education, in the basic skills, and even in the well-established area of sports and athletics. They feel a lack of guidance and attention to their individual learning problems and adjustment problems.

### THE OPINIONS OF AUTHORITIES

#### What Are the Problems?

The following is a composite of the responses to the first of three questions asked of thirty-six specialists in secondary education. They were requested to list five problems.

## The Most Important Problems Secondary Educators Must Solve

Number of  
Responses

- 24 Change the curriculum to serve better the needs of all youth
- 15 Build a curriculum based on life problems and needs of youth today
- 13 Develop democratic classroom practices with students
- 13 Develop better school and community relations—the community school
- 13 Develop a better guidance program
- 12 Exercise democracy in the administration of high schools
- 10 Adjust the curriculum to the individual abilities and interests of students
- 9 Provide better buildings and equipment
- 7 Develop better in-service training programs for teachers
- 7 Develop more functional vocational and terminal courses
- 6 Build a better balance and relationship between the general and vocational curriculums
- 5 Increase the holding power of the high school
- 5 Develop and reflect a more adequate democratic philosophy among the staff
- 5 Develop a better program of public relations
- 5 Utilize research findings in the curriculum and method of the high school
- 5 Develop an evaluation program based on the philosophy and objectives of the school
- 5 Point instruction toward behavior development and changes rather than mastery of subject matter

The problem receiving the most frequent mention by these secondary experts was that of making the curriculum of the modern secondary school better serve the needs of all youth. Comments gave evidence of a sincere desire to make the curriculum one of real life experiences:

- The multi-purpose function to American youth assumed by the secondary school means recognizing and offering a balanced educational program that combines college preparatory, pre-professional, and vocational and job preparation, provides on-the-job training for out-of-school youth, without neglecting general education. This problem emphasizes the need for adjusting to the wide range of individual differences, abilities, interests, and maturities found in the high school today.
- Providing opportunities for productive work experiences, for "real life" activities that give experiences in the practical values and personal satisfactions of work habits, basic skills in communication, group activities and processes; extending the school program be-

yond the verbalisms and make-believe of formal courses with their non-objective outcomes that are little source of satisfaction for the "non-verbal" students and for the "students who have to work the hardest."

An item of high frequency is that of providing for more democracy and creative leadership on the part of the principals, supervisors, superintendents, and other public school administrators. Over and over it was indicated that the old concept of a status leader did not necessarily meet the needs of a modern democratic administration of our high schools; that we must build a new type of democratic leadership that will free the creative abilities of all concerned in the educative process, including parents and pupils.

Several principals, superintendents, teachers, and college teachers joined in pointing out the need for leadership

and new concepts of secondary school administration.

- How can we recognize, where can we find, who shall make available the creative democratic leadership which, alone, may move us toward solutions?
- How can we leap out of the rut of tradition in school administration by which learning is channeled, confused, and stagnated?

Another item receiving high mention was that of developing more vital community relationships, utilizing community resources in the school, and building a community-centered school.

- This is the problem of developing a school system that strengthens and grows out of the activities of the community and the interests and problems of its youth, *the problem being aggravated by the absence of community spirit, unequal and inadequate school support, lack of community planning, poor leadership, and over-emphasis of individual advantage.* We must make the school and its facilities a working part of the community.

Another area mentioned frequently was that of guidance. There seemed to be rather general agreement that this was an area in which the modern high school was not doing a satisfactory job. It was emphasized that a critical problem resulted from a disproportionate number of students seeking to enter the professions. A high school teacher asks "that we provide for vocational guidance, vocational training, and work experience"; another "that we establish curricular offerings balanced properly with the occupational distribution of the workers in the community, and gear a guidance program into this practical curriculum."

Teachers mentioned, too, the need for counseling in relation to planning the high school program in terms of the individual differences, needs, and abili-

ties of their students—programs that are teacher-pupil centered. Some principals and teachers pointed out that all teachers in a high school should have some training in counseling techniques in order that they understand what is meant by the "personnel point of view" and the importance of adapting instruction to individual needs. Some also indicated that a core or common learnings area would make guidance more functional.

Other problems, not included in the above list, dealt with adequate financial support, emphasis on education for a united world, improved secondary school organization, utilization of parents in curriculum planning, a willingness to experiment with the curriculum, an improved program for mental health, better organization of extra-curricular activities, improved family life education, and developing responsibility and civic skills.

#### What Are the Blocks?

The listings on the following page were responses and frequencies to the second general question to the secondary school authorities.

The denunciation of undemocratic practices and poor leadership on the part of many administrators was often bitter and scathing. One principal called for "a drastic reorganization of secondary school administration." Another lists "inertia, then downright inability and lack of vision on the part of administrators and teachers" as the foremost block.

- Too many educators are "scared rabbits" without much imagination and without pride in our profession.
- An almost complete lack of initiative, leadership, and resourcefulness on the part of the

## Barriers or Blocks to the Solutions of These Problems

### Number of Responses

- 32 Inadequate training of secondary teachers by teacher training institutions
- 27 Lack of initiative and creative ideas by teachers and administrators
- 23 Failure of high school administrators to work democratically with teachers
- 17 Poor professional leadership
- 15 Inflexible courses of study
- 13 Community indifference
- 13 Domination by college preparatory function
- 12 Lack of necessary teaching equipment, supplies, etc.
- 11 Domination by textbook
- 10 Poor public relations
- 10 Lack of financial support
- 8 Vested interests
- 8 Lack of core or common learnings concept
- 7 Failure to use research
- 6 Poor guidance and counseling
- 5 Lag between technological and social concepts
- 5 Influence of traditional recitation
- 5 Influence of state certification requirements

immediate leaders of secondary education in the community. (I know there are some exceptions.)

Equally critical were the comments about the barriers created by outmoded programs and traditional teaching methods in teacher education. A college president stated that the blocks to the solution of the problems include:

- A sleepy public and a host of colleges and universities more concerned about their own programs than an effective system of democratic education.

A number of comments indicated that lack of courage, insecurity, and reluctance to change on the part of secondary school people are major factors in the hindrance of progress.

- Our own laziness partly, but maybe even more we don't realize how far behind we are, immersed as we are in our "texts" and in our daily schedules. However, part of it is due to plain "institutionalism"; let's keep on doing what we always have. It is safe, comfortable, and won't raise any questions.

The large size of secondary schools in some cities also comes in for criticism by the respondents.

- There is a fallacious conclusion that a big physical plant with more specialized offerings, even if the plant isolates itself from the community or isolates students within its thousands, satisfies this multi-purpose demand by the very variety of its offerings and the apparent economy of its management. Different communities and student bodies have different optimum sizes and offerings, all subject to change within changing economies and vocational trends—often not fitting nicely into state-wide formulas or long-time plans.

One obstacle of significance, which did not receive high frequency mention, is our failure to provide opportunity for teachers from different departments to work together on the overall design of the curriculum.

### What Solutions Are Suggested?

The specialists in secondary school education listed the following as possible solutions to the problems:

## Possible Solutions for These Important Problems

Number of  
Responses

- 18 School-community cooperation, utilization of resources, and community school
- 16 Better pre-service education
- 15 In-service education by school systems
- 13 Group dynamics
- 13 Better democratic leadership from administrators
- 12 In-service education by teacher training institutions
- 10 Workshops
- 10 Free time for teacher planning and curriculum work
- 9 Better teacher-pupil-parent planning
- 9 Better teacher-pupil planning
- 7 Permit local high school buildings to serve as unit for curriculum development
- 5 Studying local needs and building curriculum upon them
- 5 Better educational research
- 5 Core curriculum
- 5 Work experience
- 5 More financial support
- 4 Improved professional associations
- 4 Better utilization of research
- 4 Better guidance

The need for more adequate buildings, equipment, supplies, and teaching materials was mentioned by a considerable number of teachers and administrators. Many went into some detail to discuss the necessity for better support for education. Improved public relations, an eleven- or twelve-month teaching contract, and shared supervision were among the constructive suggestions.

On the whole, however, it seems possible to summarize most of the solutions under two general areas: better pre-service education of teachers, and cooperative programs of public school personnel and training institutions to provide in-service education.

The respondents believed that teacher education programs should provide a more functional type of general education, decrease specialization and em-

phasize broad teaching majors, and, above all, relate broad subject fields one to another. It was suggested that there should be earlier, more varied, and more realistic contacts with children, youth, schools, and social learning situations during the teacher education program. College professors need to "practice what they preach." Much of the professional curriculum of teachers should be based on more careful studies of child development and child growth as well as an understanding of adolescents and their problems.

Finally, it was pointed out that there should be an increasing amount of student teaching and further experimentation with internship. A number of these people pleaded for some type of teacher education in keeping with the increasing trend toward the core, common learnings, or social education programs

in our high schools. Few training institutions, it was pointed out, are really experimenting or even keeping abreast of the needs as an ever-increasing number of public schools seek teachers for this modern type of education.

An experienced teacher-educator made the comment that:

. . . the problem lies primarily in the unrealistic nature of the pre-service education of present-day secondary school teachers.

Few teacher training institutions or liberal arts colleges training teachers are providing realistic and functional education for secondary school teachers who will be concerned with the over-all development of young people rather than solely with their ability to verbalize subject matter.

One specific and concrete step that might be taken to improve the situation would be to encourage staff members in institutions training teachers to spend more time than they now do *in actual high school and other field situations*.

The close relationship between pre- and in-service education was emphasized frequently. A great variety of techniques for in-service education was indicated. It was suggested that teachers should be freed for time for thinking, planning, and producing curriculum materials. Local high school buildings should serve as units for curriculum development. High schools should study local needs and build their curriculum upon these. They should seek and use the best educational research available. Workshops should be conducted throughout the year, both in the public schools and on college campuses. A twelve-month school year was demanded, and a week's opening conference for all teachers to plan their work prior to the opening of school.

Significant is the fact that group dynamics and social processes received

considerable emphasis by these people. They felt that here was a new frontier for research and experimentation in order to determine more effective means of working with fellow teachers, community adults, and children. Over and over again was emphasized the important matter of freedom, courage, and initiative, creative ability, to experiment and to plan in order to provide better education for youth today:

- We must work cooperatively on our entire program of education. This concerns the development of cooperative group action on the part of the entire staff in determining school policy and sharing in determining the broad outline of the school program. It also involves cooperative planning in the classroom.

Teacher-administrator-parent planning would focus on such matters as teacher-pupil planning, a curriculum based on the developmental needs of adolescents, wider use of learning resources, and other all-school concerns. One professor indicates that a desirable way of bringing teachers with different specialties together is:

- Have them work cooperatively on common problems which place more and more emphasis upon the 'all-school' objectives toward which all teachers must work. This can be done without denying the value of accepted 'courses.' Such all-school objectives might be improvement in student use of language; and improvement in the behavior of boys and girls with respect to (a) participation in group activities, (b) acceptance of group responsibility, (c) general social deportment, (d) problem-solving ability.

Helpful comments indicated further the types of problems needing cooperative study of high school staffs.

- Discard those facts of the secondary school that are holdovers from another day and have a curriculum based entirely on the develop-

mental needs of adolescents, the demands of present-day life, and the values our democratic society holds important.

- Use community leaders, civic officers, and local facilities as learning resources. Free children from the confining classroom conditions and let their questions and felt needs reach the ears of parents and general public directly.

#### HOW THE OPINIONS COMPARE

Although the questions asked the high school students and the secondary authorities in this questionnaire were not parallel, a number of interesting observations may be made. There is close relationship between the item placed highest by the students, that of vocational education, and the mention by the experts of the need to adapt the academic secondary curriculum to better meet the needs of all youth. The second item mentioned by the students, human relations, was certainly paramount in the minds of the experts as they indicated an increasing need for democratic planning with high school youth, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Personal and social development, the building of personality, the development of character, and friendship coincides rather closely with the relatively high mention of guidance, counseling, general education, and a more functional education to meet the needs of life as indicated by the high school authorities. And even as the youth themselves mentioned the importance of college preparation, we find the experts do not overlook this vital need for our more able young people.

Both groups recognized as weaknesses in the high school curriculum insufficient home and family life educa-

tion, inadequate concern for personal problems of youth, an over-emphasis on the value of learning subject matter, and a lack of consideration for each pupil as a unique personality and an individual. The high school seniors' concern for more assistance in their personal and social development and in their relations with others is more emphatic than the educators' demand for teaching that has as its objectives changed behavior.

#### What Can We Do?

If we take seriously the secondary school authorities' condemnation of textbook domination, the authoritarian teacher, the traditional recitation, and vested interests in subject departments, we will go a long way toward meeting the needs expressed by these students. If we listen to the requests for more democratic and courageous leadership in secondary school and a new type of training for secondary school teachers, we will demand that teacher education institutions renovate their programs to include the ideas for pre- and in-service education found in this study.

One outstanding fact in this study is the rather general dissatisfaction by teachers, principals, superintendents, and professors of secondary education with the leadership in secondary schools. Graduate and in-service programs and certification requirements for administrators must be re-examined in terms of the present.

School leaders need to plan more carefully for adequate and functional programs of in-service education in which the contributions of teachers are utilized and cooperative planning is paramount. The school must work with the total community in order to make

education a vital force through building a real community-educational center. The high position of guidance in the list of problems of educators and the requests for additional assistance by youth should be a sobering thought to those who feel that our guidance programs have been well developed.

Finally, these results imply that the area of democracy must be extended within the school and the community. This is essential if our youth are to join vigorously in helping to solve the problems facing society universally, problems held in common with all the youth of the world.

## *Youth in a Changing Culture*\_\_\_\_\_

HOWARD CUMMINGS

To the familiar criteria for the selection of learning experiences—the demands of society and the demands of youth itself—Howard Cummings, assistant specialist for government and economics, Division of Secondary Education, U. S. Office of Education, Washington, D. C., suggests that we add also the adjustments necessary between these criteria in a constantly changing society. We believe those concerned with planning learning experiences for high school youth, which will be truly functional in this world of 1949, will find much food for thought in Mr. Cummings' article.

STATEMENTS of objectives for secondary education are usually based upon one of two sets of criteria: the demands of contemporary society; and the needs or the demands of the youth groups which are seeking full adult status in that society. It might well be asked whether these should be the sole criteria for selecting the objectives for secondary education in the United States today?

Because of the climate of opinion in which they have grown up and because they are living in a dynamic society, the members of each generation of youth have acquired some habits and conventions which are not accepted by members of older generations. If this

were not true the cultural lag in an age of invention and mass use of technology would be even greater than it is. Society, however, is not inclined to let youth build an entirely new social order every time a new generation of youngsters grows up. Social stability and unity rest upon the acceptance of ethical and moral, political and economic concepts which should be modified only after careful consideration of consequences and alternatives.

### **Adjustment As a Prime Factor**

In light of what has been said, is there a third set of criteria which might be used as a basis for selecting the objectives of secondary education? Since

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