

Curriculum News

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Core Programs and the Talented

• The Sixth National Conference on Core Teaching was held on October 17-19 at Ball State Teachers College, Muncie, Indiana. More than 200 participants from 21 states were in attendance. The various meetings centered around such topics as "How Fares the Core in the Sputnik Era," "Current Challenges to the Development of Core Programs," "The Citizenship Education Project and the Core." Interesting features were the showing of a new film entitled, *Characteristics of a Core Program*, directed by Marcella Lawler, and a filmstrip, *A Core Class Tells Its Story*, prepared under the direction of Myrtle Toops of the Burriss School of Ball State Teachers College. This filmstrip is based upon the core program at Burriss School, and is distributed through the college. The conference closed with a panel discussion by a group of core teachers from The Ohio State University School dealing with the various aspects of the school's program.

During the conference there was much discussion of the effects of recent attacks on the schools and the various proposals for meeting the Soviet challenge, on the survival and growth of core programs. A recent bulletin by Grace Wright, entitled *Block-Time Classes and the Core Program* (Bulletin 1958, No. 6. U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C.) was cited by one of the speakers to indicate that since 1952, there has

been a spectacular rise in "block-time classes," characterized by some form of correlation of subjects; a slight decrease in the number of programs, characterized as fusion, unified studies, or structured problem areas, and a slight increase in programs in which "pupils and teachers are free to select problems on which they wish to work." The study involved a 25 percent sample of 12,052 junior and junior-senior high schools in the United States. Block-time classes were found in 19.3 percent of the schools sampled. By far the largest number of these programs are in the junior high schools, especially in the seventh and eighth grades.

It was pointed out by the same speaker that the core program, defined as embracing all or part of general education, organized in terms of broad problems of living, and drawing upon whatever fields of knowledge or other resources are pertinent to a particular problem, had earned the right to survive in an era dominated by the race for the conquest of outer space. Evidence was cited from numerous studies to indicate that students in core programs when compared with students in conventional subject-centered programs, tend to do as well or better in subject-matter achievement and considerably better in acquiring attitudes and understandings closely associated with common democratic citizenship.

• James B. Conant in his "Study of the

American High School" continues to make news as he moves across the nation addressing board members, administrators, teachers and laymen. The major proposals advocated in these addresses seem to be about the same, adapted, however, to local conditions. The purpose of discussing his proposed program¹ in this column is to note its probable impact upon the development of core programs.

Basic to the program is the identification of the 15 to 20 percent of the "academically talented" youth by means of standardized tests, principally in mathematics and linguistics. Then with "good guidance," Dr. Conant believes that a high percentage of the talented boys could be "persuaded" to elect the "solid" subjects. He is not sure the girls would yield to this persuasion and *that* apparently is to be regretted.

Now, exactly what are these talented students to be "persuaded" to take? Dr. Conant very generously permits a choice depending upon whether the "bent" of the student is scientific or linguistic. If scientific, the student should take four years of mathematics, three years of science, four years of one foreign language, in addition to the required four years of English and three years of social studies. To carry on this program successfully, Dr. Conant believes that the student should spend 15 to 20 hours per week in homework. This means a nine-hour day, not counting student activities, or physical education.

For the linguistically inclined student the requirement should be three years of

mathematics, two years of science, four years of one foreign language, three years of a second foreign language, together with four years of required English and three years for social science, two of which would be history, and one, Problems of American Democracy. Again a nine- or ten-hour day, exclusive of physical education and extra-class activities.

For these students who take a "tough academic program," what is the fate of the fine and practical arts and crafts, health and physical education, and the many opportunities which the modern school affords for adventures into a wide variety of specialized activities? Surely many of the "academically talented" students also have great potentialities in these fields. If the guidance counselor has been *persuasive* enough, these "soft" areas are either eliminated from the student's program, or are to be carried on at the "fag" end of a ten-hour day. What is likely to happen in many cases is that the excessive demands of the "solid" subjects will result in a cut-back in the general education area. This means that the school's block-time classes for dealing with the broad problems of adolescents, which draw freely from all pertinent fields of knowledge, are likely to suffer in order to find time for the so-called "tough academic program."

It will be pointed out that all this applies only to the "academically talented," but when we take a further look at the proposed program, we find that all students are to be sectioned on the basis of ability in most of the program of general education, as well as in the elective areas. Forgetting, for the moment, his scientific background, Dr. Conant tells us:

I know the subject of ability grouping has been controversial. I could readily recite the arguments *pro* and *con*. But I am convinced, largely from the testimony of stu-

¹The information concerning Dr. Conant's proposals was secured mainly from the following sources: James B. Conant, "Some Problems of the American High School," *Phi Delta Kappan* 40:50-55 (November 1958); published reports of local addresses before Associations of School Boards; and from "Tryouts for Good Ideas," *Life* 44:120-21 (April 1958).

dents, that there should be sections for the more able pupils in English, the social studies, and courses in mathematics, science, and the foreign languages which are elected by pupils with a wide range of abilities.² This sectioning is to be "subject-by-subject," thus precluding any possibility of developing a comprehensive "problems of living" core program.

Those who advocate such programs believe that they provide more adequately than do conventional subject-centered courses, for the development of the common attitudes, understandings, and skills needed by all for effective democratic citizenship. Students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and from all levels of ability live and work together on the solution of common personal-social problems. A program of this character would be carried on throughout the entire secondary period in a block of time ranging from two-thirds of the school day at the lower levels to one-third of the school day at the higher levels.

What does the Conant proposal have to offer as a substitute for this common integrating program of general education? In order to develop "social-cohesion," a single course in the senior year in problems of American democracy is to be required and here the grouping is to be heterogeneous. This course, together with heterogeneously grouped home rooms, "tied closely to an effective student council, physical education classes and general student activities," constitutes the program for developing social cohesion and mutual understandings. We may well be skeptical of its adequacy in an era characterized by anxiety and confusion.

To sum up, the segregation of the "talented 15 or 20 percent of the stu-

² Conant, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

dents in order to permit them to take the "tough courses," reduces the core to a program for the mediocre or slightly above average student. And even if the core could survive this divisive procedure, it would still have to face the fact that the extensive ability grouping of students at lower levels of talent, precludes the organization of a block-time "problems of living" core program. Boards of education and administrators who are interested in strengthening their programs of common citizenship education, had better take a hard critical look at the Conant proposals before adopting them.

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Working with Learners

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