

## Pressures Affect the High School Curriculum

**Continuity in the secondary school program is being subjected to many pressures. These influences should be identified and analyzed as to possible motives and ultimate effects.**

DURING the past year a badly frightened and pride-wounded nation needed a space-race scapegoat. Education in general and secondary education specifically were elected as whipping boys responsible for the nation's ills. At the same time the public expected education to find some panacea for the panic which accompanied our "post-Sputnik jitters."

The success of Russia's Sputnik was commonly attributed to the Soviets' tightly controlled, severely demanding, and highly selective school system. Consequently, many Americans clamored for a selective school program to train the intellectually elite. The pressures were tremendous for education to find some quick solution. Few people, however, realized that the ultimate victims of all this pressure were school pupils, since all such forces playing on the school curriculum finally come to bear on individual boys and girls. As a result the influences on secondary education today tend to disrupt the continuity of an education appropriate to the individual needs of each student.

Much of the public pressure on education results from a widespread mis-

understanding of the drastically different nature of today's secondary school population. It is difficult to comprehend the change from 1900, with compulsory education to age 16 in just seven states, to 1950, with compulsory education for all youth in all states. Critical but sincere citizens have little conception of the almost impossible task assigned to today's high schools when, for example, they expect all tenth graders to achieve at the tenth grade level. Only a few realize that many "compulsorily educated" youth lack the native ability to ever complete normal high school work. For too long the secondary schools have been asked to educate both the educable and the barely educable by a mass process with too few teachers. The uncomplaining attitude with which teachers have undertaken this task is both to their credit and discredit. One result has been that an unenlightened public was ripe for panic and ready for panaceas after the launching of the Russians' first satellite. Educators generally are reaping the harvest of their own failure to inform all citizens adequately and continually of the practical problems inherent in universal education.

## What Are the Influences?

In addition to pressures on our schools from the general public, a number of "educational authorities" have exerted strong pressures on secondary education. Some of these individuals have only recently assumed this role of "educational authority." Admiral Rickover, for example, reportedly favors our copying the European educational system with academic offerings only for children who can prove educational competence. Arthur E. Bestor of the University of Illinois while at work in the very heart of a research center has reaped the criticism of statisticians for his abuse of statistical procedures to the ultimate detriment of secondary education. Fortunately, there are men of stature such as James B. Conant who have given careful and firsthand study to the American high school. His authoritative evaluations and his constructive recommendations are not as spectacular as are the criticisms of pseudo-educational authorities but are far more beneficial to the cause of secondary education.

American colleges exert an increasing influence on the nature and continuity of the individual student's high school program. This occurs in spite of the fact that only a small percentage of high school freshmen ever reach the sophomore year in college. In many areas colleges specify the high school courses necessary for college admission. Unfortunately, college preparatory courses soon become the prestige track in which too many students enroll. As a result the presence of less qualified students reduces the value of advanced classes for those actually college bound. In this way

the continuity of high school studies is determined by colleges for far too many high school students.

The need to pass college entrance examinations represents a growing influence on the content and continuity of the high school curriculum. Secondary schools must include in the curriculum all facts covered in college entrance examinations. Thus, any program of curricular change or improvement cannot ignore potential test information regardless of its relative importance. Competition and comparison of high school results force each school to "teach for tests." Curriculum content and continuity, therefore, tend to become crystallized because of college entrance examinations.

One of the strongest influences on the high school program of studies is the recent National Defense Education Act. Most of the sections of this act appear to be educationally desirable. However, some provisions appear contrary to the basic premise that each state is responsible for the functioning of its public school system and that the people in local areas control their own schools through elected school boards. The provision of funds to further selected courses appears to create a precedent for the encouragement of curriculum in line with national emergencies. Can we justify any structuring of the local high school curriculum by federal legislation? Will states or local districts be able to resist conformity to national plans when dollars are an attractive concomitant? Are we welcoming a philosophy foreign to this country once we begin to direct human talent toward the achievement of state promoted goals? In considering our heritage of individual freedom which men have fought to earn and save for us, we should remember

---

**KENNETH A. ERICKSON is principal,  
Franklin High School, Portland, Oregon.**

---

that the man who removed the mountain began by carrying away small stones!

Is the student who today specializes in science, math, and foreign languages more of a patriot than other students? Ever since Congress placed a halo of prestige over the scientist, he has become top man on the educational totem pole. As a result, how many of tomorrow's social scientists, psychologists, doctors, musicians and artists are being diverted to fields of science and math? Are men trained in the physical sciences actually more needed than social scientists who are versed in ways of getting along with other people? Willard Spalding wrote in the October 1958 issue of *Educational Leadership*, "American education, if it is to continue to produce questing minds, must also continue to help man learn to live with man. No more challenging problem confronts us than learning how to become safe from each other." Albert Einstein has said, "Science has a sharp eye for ways and means, but too frequently it is blind to ends and values." We already know how to annihilate people in an amazingly effective manner. We must learn how to get along better with our world neighbors. Is it possible that Congress has misjudged our ultimate needs when influencing local curriculum in favor of physical science?

The actions of state legislative bodies also affect the continuity of the high school curriculum. Legislators are sincere in striving for what they believe to be best for children but their actions tend to strait-jacket local curriculum content. For example, Oregon law, in addition to requiring American History, Civil Government, and the U. S. Constitution, also requires that "kindness to animals" be taught by each teacher for

one quarter hour each week, that alcohol education be taught as thoroughly as arithmetic or geography, and that local administrators plan Arbor Day exercises in which all students participate. Similar pressures for statewide curriculum by legislation often disrupt the continuity and sequence of an otherwise well-planned high school program.

Other influences on the secondary program of studies can only be identified here. Curricular stagnation often results from pressures which work to maintain the status quo. Resistance to new ideas probably grows out of the comfort man finds in familiar routines as well as his lack of security in new situations. Publishers tend to push old standard texts beyond their days of superiority. However, this is also done because teachers as creatures of habit tend to favor texts with which they are familiar. State-wide or nation-wide competitive examinations tend to promote the status quo and discourage curricular experimentation.

### Positive Proposals

On the other hand several positive proposals are developing for high schools. The first is the impressive increase in self-study and evaluation undertaken by secondary schools. One example is the curriculum evaluative study initiated by the Portland School Board to be completed in cooperation with most Oregon colleges. Recommendations will be forthcoming for the improvement of that portion of the high school curriculum appropriate for college-bound students. A second positive influence today is the nation-wide increased emphasis on sound high school counseling programs under which students are guided on an individual basis into homogeneous

*(Continued on page 322)*

satisfaction with the program was encouraging to the teacher.

Study of the results of standardized tests of her children led the teacher to conclude that the area of comprehension needed strengthening. Anecdotal records indicated that the children had developed a high interest in reading, and the test revealed that they had acquired a sizable reading vocabulary. In planning for the next year, it seemed clear that the approach should be altered to provide for some small group work in addition to the individualized program. Consequently the teacher planned to reserve certain textbooks at the various levels to be used periodically with small groups for the purpose of developing additional skill in word attack and comprehension.

Therefore, in line with the information gathered, the original plan was modified. The teacher set forth on the second year in her attempt to develop an individualized reading program that would more adequately help the children she teaches to achieve on a level commensurate with their individual ability.

—HELEN HEACOCK HILSON, *first grade teacher, Citrus Grove Elementary School, Miami, Florida; and* GLENN G. THOMAS, *professor of education, University of Miami, and principal of the Henry S. West Laboratory School, Coral Gables, Florida.*

---

#### Pressures

*(Continued from page 281)*

class sections commensurate with their abilities.

In reviewing the influences affecting today's high school curriculum a number of persistent questions arise. While adults cry for schools to "beef up" the

program and to "crack down" on students, labor pushes for a 35 hour work week and TV commercials insist we should "live modern," have fun, enjoy life, travel, and take it easy. How can we expect students to sacrifice their time to study diligently in a society of adults that is self-indulging, ease-oriented, and fun-loving?

When Congress decided that tax money should be spent to insure the preparation of greater numbers of scientists, what far reaching precedents were established? When our present bumper crop of war babies graduates from college, might we have too many scientists? Will our government then find it necessary to set quotas on individuals to be trained in specific fields? In our present cold war, how much of Russian methods can we afford to adopt? Is our primary educational consideration still to meet the needs of individual pupils or are we yielding basic ideals in an attempt to meet the needs of changing emergencies?

Is today's basic educational objective the preferential training of physical scientists? Will any voices of protest be heard above the jingling of federal dollars in local school coffers crying out to "Help capable students go to college, help provide needed buildings, help with adequate salaries, but don't infiltrate the local school curriculum!"

The continuity of the secondary school curriculum is being subjected to many pressures. These influences must be identified and analyzed both for basic motives and ultimate effects on education in a free society. An appropriate high school curriculum individually designed for boys and girls is being challenged. Will changes in our philosophy of educational control result in ultimate modifications of American freedom?

Copyright © 1959 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.