On a Review of the Conant Report

Urbana, Illinois
May 12, 1959

Editor
Educational Leadership

Dear Sir:

I have read with interest Dr. Van Til's review of *The American High School Today.* ¹ Being a relative newcomer to ASCD, and not aware of your desire for responses to reviews, I would like to outline my reaction to his review of a book which is receiving considerable attention—attention which it may well have deserved, and received, despite the "razzle dazzle of its publication."

Dr. Van Til has, it appears, overlooked two rather basic points. First, and foremost, the book presents a plan for organization, administrative organization if you will, and should not be regarded as a guide for curriculum development. (The nonattention given to the teacher and supervisor should have made this apparent.) It seems almost axiomatic that such organization in a high school must precede, or at least accompany, any real growth in curriculum. By definition, development would follow, not precede organization. In fact, the reviewer's concern with what Dr. Conant feels should be given "within the courses" is fascinating. Is Dr. Van Til suggesting that we should look to college presidents as writers of courses of study in our high schools?

Second, the book was not written to be read exclusively by the people professionally most concerned with developing the high school curriculum—the principals and teachers. As such, it follows a rule which is overlooked too often in education—what is offered should be amenable to evaluation. Dr. Conant appears to be saying that, by his specifications, a school which is meeting the stated recommendations is a "better" school than one which is not. These recommendations are susceptible to immediate application by a patron to his local high school as evaluative criteria. Dr. Van Til's disagreement appears to be concerned with the research design rather than the major problem of the validity of Dr. Conant's definition of "better."

In addition, the reviewer objects to the tendency by Dr. Conant to equate "adequacy" with quantitative measurement. Is Dr. Van Til implying that Teacher X may not be able to offer a better English program to 100 students a day for three years than she could to 200 students a day for two years?

And finally, Dr. Van Til states that the Report assumes that proliferation of many subjects is better than concentration upon fewer. In fact, Dr. Conant not only suggests additional courses, but he also suggests greater concentration (e.g., four years of language). However, again the Report suggests an administrative reorganization through establishment of summer schools, additional periods, increased student course load, etc. Hence, the proliferation is in addition to concentration, and not as a substitute for it.

Sincerely,

JAMES P. STEFFENSEN
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The Reviewer Replies

New York, N. Y.
July 21, 1959

To the Editor:

Since my book reviews usually create the stir of a rose leaf falling into the Grand Canyon and since I have seldom had so close a reader as Dr. Steffensen, I had best start by summarizing what I actually did say. It is barely possible that some readers may have been thinking about something other than my review in the months since it appeared!

Contrary to the impression the reader might get from Dr. Steffensen's letter, almost half of my review praised Dr. Conant's ideas. The review began, "there is much in James B. Conant's first report with which we are in agreement," and went on to commend his "eloquent case for the comprehensive high school" and his emphasis on consolidation. The review summarized 16 of Conant's 21 recommendations and said, "Surely, all of these sound reasonable."

The review then indicated disagreement with the highly quantitative approach to curriculum making characteristic of the Conant Report (4 of this being seen as necessarily better than 3 of that) with attendant neglect of the crux of the curriculum problem: what goes on within courses, what is the quality of the learning experiences. The Report's tests of the adequacy of general education were questioned and the review concluded that Conant's program for the academically talented reflected his own personal cultural background and life experiences.

Dr. Steffensen sees the book as a plan for "administrative organization" which "should not be regarded as a guide for curriculum development." Curriculum development "would follow, not precede organization." In other words, the really basic decisions as to the curriculum—decisions adopting the comprehensive high school; specifying programs of general education, electives for job seekers, electives for college attendants; adopting evaluative criteria; setting up a counseling system (rec. 1); setting up individualized programs and eliminating tracks (rec. 2); specifying the courses required for graduation (rec. 3); adopting ability grouping (rec. 4)—pick up your own copy and read the remaining 21 recommendations—are "administrative organization" matters, not curriculum development! Only after the fundamental issues
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of curricular structure, curricular offerings, and curricular requirements are determined by “administrative organization” does “any real growth in curriculum” begin. To borrow a phrase from Dr. Steffensen, this conception of the subordinate—nay, almost nonexistent—role of the curriculum developer is “fascinating.”

I agree that “this book was not written to be read exclusively by the people professionally most concerned with developing the high school curriculum—the principals and teachers.” (Let us charitably not inquire what those “professionally most concerned with developing the high school curriculum” have left to do by way of curriculum development after “administrative organization” has made the really fundamental decisions.) It is true that the “recommendations are susceptible to immediate application by a patron to his local high school as evaluative criteria.” The fact that this immediate application by patrons is taking place is all the more reason to scrutinize the recommendations carefully.

In evaluation, “better” means quality, not quantity. I cannot find any reference in my review to mysterious Teacher X and his or her ability to offer a better program to 100 students a day for three years, etc. The review did object to the Report’s judging the adequacy of general education exclusively by “adequate” instruction in English composition and in social studies and by the existence of ability grouping in required subjects, with “adequate” instruction in English composition defined by the work load and attitude of teachers, and with no reference to meaningful writing activities by students.

“Is Dr. Van Til suggesting that we should look to college presidents as writers of courses of study in our high schools?” No, Dr. Steffensen, he is not. (He doesn’t even suggest that curriculum development means “writing courses of study.”) Nor is he suggesting that we should look to college presidents as the sole participants in determining “administrative organization.” Leaders in curriculum development, including you, Dr. Steffensen, and all the other highly qualified members of ASCD and especially their elected board and officers, should be heard too in the Great Debate on education—unless they are to play no role in the vital curriculum decisions now being made in the name of “administrative organization.”

Sincerely yours,
WILLIAM VAN TIL, Chairman
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