A Look at Issues

THE past decade has been a most significant era for junior high school education. During this period the junior high school has come into its own as an established organizational unit in our system of public education. The unprecedented increase in enrollment above the elementary school level has created urgent needs for new buildings involving the expenditure of vast sums of money. This has forced administrators and boards of education to make decisions regarding the structural organization of the school system. Fortunately, in most communities decisions have been made to include the junior high school as an integral, respectable unit in the organizational pattern.

There are distinct reasons why the junior high school movement has become an established one. Studies in human development indicate that 12-14-year-olds have unique problems and needs. The junior high school is now conceived as an essential organizational unit, free from traditional impacts, which can provide a program designed to help these young people with their problems and needs. Furthermore, beyond the elementary school there is need to expand and extend the program of general education, to provide for exploration and articulation and to realize other important functions familiar to those who are conversant with junior high school education.

As the status and significance of the junior high school program have become accepted and established, there have been and will continue to be attempts, both within and outside the profession, to "capture" the program for purposes which are often quite foreign to the functions upon which students of junior high school education have agreed. Movements are now afoot to ignore the unique needs and problems of the 12-14 year age group and to extend downward the senior high school program. This would essentially result in a six-year senior high school with many subjects taught in grades 7-9 which are now taught in grades 10-12.

Function and Purpose

The movement to make radical changes in the functions and purposes of the junior high school and in the focus of its program has raised many issues which must be solved in the very near future.

The first of these issues has to do with the functions and purposes of the junior high school program. Students of junior high school education are generally agreed upon the objectives of the program. There is, however, much yet to be
accomplished in the implementation of these carefully determined purposes. Shall we dedicate our efforts to developing a program based upon these broad purposes, or shall we employ a haphazard approach yielding to whims, pressures and special interests rather than using a frame of reference based upon the real needs, interests and concerns of this age group, including the impact of society upon them?

A second crucial issue which must be faced realistically is the relationship between general education and specialization in the junior high school program. It has been customary in the past, when the seventh and eighth grades were a part of the elementary schools, for the instructional program to be wholly one of general education. There is evidence to indicate that some junior high schools are abandoning the general education focus in these grades and through highly elective programs moving toward specialization.

It is interesting to note that while this is actually happening in junior high schools, more and more colleges are instituting general education programs in the first two years, representing from one-half to three-fourths of the student’s program. Should the general education program be reduced in the junior high school to permit the beginning of specialization? Is the optimum time to begin specialization during the junior high school period? What is important for impressionable preadolescents and early adolescents, expanded general education or a reduction of breadth for the sake of developing depth in a particular learning area?

A third significant issue falls in the area of teacher education and certification. Although most teacher education institutions have programs for elementary and high school teachers, few have developed programs for teaching in junior high schools. Furthermore, while most states have separate certification for elementary teachers and teachers in grades 9-12, there are few states that recognize the need for the certification of junior high school teachers. Because of these two conditions, the junior high school has become a “no man’s land,” staffed with many teachers who do not understand children in this age group and who are not prepared to do an effective job of teaching and achieving the purposes of the junior high school program.

Shall we develop career teachers for junior high schools as we do for elementary schools and high schools? Or shall we continue to make the junior high school a dumping ground for teachers who cannot obtain positions in senior high school or who are unsuccessful at the other levels?

Only a few of the major issues in junior high school education have been mentioned here. These and other issues are discussed in the articles in this issue of Educational Leadership. There is an urgent need for careful consideration and study of the junior high school program. Through this issue of its journal, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is encouraging and lending assistance to all who are concerned about these issues and problems. The future of the junior high school program rests largely in the leadership provided by the membership of the Association.

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