Uniformity vs. Diversity in the Senior High School

MANY of the issues in secondary education today relate to one central question: In what ways and to what extent should high schools, especially senior high schools, be alike? How, if at all, should the organization and program of the senior high school differ from community to community?

One’s appraisal of the various proposals for the high school of today and tomorrow is necessarily biased by his viewpoint as to the desirability of uniformity among secondary schools throughout the nation. Those who believe that the national need is served best by uniform high school programs look toward patterns of experimentation which can be universally applied. Others are more interested in developments which serve uniquely the needs of particular communities and populations. Thus some readers of this issue of Educational Leadership will undoubtedly see greatest value in those practices described herein which can be widely utilized. Other readers will favor those practices which can be tailor-made for particular school populations and best rejected elsewhere.

This question of uniformity vs. diversity has been a central one in American secondary education throughout its history. An interest in diversity led to the establishment of the academy, then of the high school and special purpose schools and to the introduction of varied programs of studies. Less than a century ago marked diversity brought about the efforts of national committees to clarify (perhaps standardize) the purposes and the program of secondary schools. Whether to seek identical or different practices is a basic issue in today’s arguments over such matters as curriculum content, school organization patterns, and the functions of testing and guidance programs.

The current ferment in senior high schools is stimulated by various reports and criticisms that strongly suggest the need for greater uniformity in secondary education throughout the nation. Some of the more reactionary arguments strongly resemble those recorded in the latter part of the nineteenth century when there really was extreme diversity among secondary schools. The studies of the Committee of Ten and later national committees dealing with the problems of college entrance and preparation were clearly and probably correctly intended to bring about greater uniformity.

The work of accrediting associations in the various regions was initiated for the
same purpose. Other factors, however, operated to continue some differences among the schools and their programs: especially the factors of local traditions and educational ideals, and of local variations in school control and financial support.

Influences for Uniformity

Both sets of factors continue as we enter the 1960's. There are now especially strong influences to the direction of greater uniformity among the senior high schools throughout the nation. Among the more significant influences are these:

1. The growing recognition of the mobility of our population, and the consequent question as to whether the local high school should any longer pattern its curriculum to the social, economic and occupational status of the community

2. The various arguments from many sources, some of them highly prestigious, that our national survival and international leadership require greater emphasis in the secondary school on specific patterns of science, mathematics, and modern languages courses, and in general on a specified program of academic preparation for the more able students

3. Federal appropriations, under the National Defense Education Act, to support curriculum provisions in science, mathematics, and modern languages, and also provisions of guidance and testing services

4. The aspirations of the American people for their children to have a college education and the accompanying belief, enforced by many pressures, that this is possible only as certain tradi-
tional college entrance subjects are given priority in the curriculum

5. A wide use of various types of achievement tests in the common academic areas

6. The extensive study of the Conant report on The American High School Today, and efforts in many local school districts to implement the Conant recommendations

7. The unrest of professional educators as to the adequacy of past and present curriculum scope and sequence in some areas, and the consequent readiness for wholesale adoption of new, perhaps promising, programs

8. Widespread dissatisfaction with current organizational and teaching practices, and especially with their failure to realize more fully the potentials of mechanical teaching aids.

Resistance to Prescription

At the same time there are strong, contrary factors to be evaluated in reaching a judgment as to the desirability and likelihood of uniformity among schools. Many lay citizens and educators resist any blueprint for senior high school education in the belief that deliberate efforts toward uniformity would need to be focused on the prescription of some group or agency. These proponents of diversity insist that the traditions of democracy are in strong conflict with the existence of any official national agency empowered to make such prescriptions. Too, all of us recognize that differences among communities as to concentration of population, financial support, and community aspirations cannot be eliminated rapidly. Few would deny that cultural differences arising from racial backgrounds of the popu-
lation, present socioeconomic status, and community occupations, may continue to influence the types of specialized education offered in individual schools.

Furthermore, variations in the preparation and quality of teachers and administrators, and in the educational level and interest of the population and of the controlling boards, cannot immediately be reduced by adoption of uniform standards and programs. There is also reason to believe that certain vitality of education in many American communities is explained by the concern of their citizens for good schools.

**Diversity and Quality**

It is very difficult to develop a theory of secondary education which reconciles these opposing influences and arguments. But the writer's judgment is that our senior high schools are, in fact, definitely moving toward a greater degree of uniformity, and that this trend is likely to continue. We can expect, I believe, increasing uniformity among senior high schools in at least such respects as the following:

- Elimination of smaller high schools
- Provision of guidance services
- A minimum offering in English, modern languages, social studies, science, and mathematics, and an increase of specialized offerings in the same subject fields plus those of business education, industrial education, and the arts
- Extension of the school day and year
- Higher standards of teacher selection, training, and compensation
- More and better use of modern learning aids.

Uniformity in such respects as these is probably to the good. There are other respects, however, in which diverse practices must be encouraged if the senior high school is to serve American youth well. Techniques of individualized instruction are sorely needed in every classroom and school, but these can be effectively developed only as individual teachers become interested in discovering and using the techniques. Effective teaching practices simply cannot be standardized; in fact, the outstanding weakness, not noted by most current critics, of secondary education today is the prevalence of instructional procedures which fail to stimulate learning.

Ways and means of organizing instructional groups depend on too many variable, human factors to expect national formulas as to ability grouping, small and large classes, and team teaching to work out well in each school. The patterns of course requirements to which such overweening attention has been given by most national committees, are of considerably less significance than patterns of learning experiences planned for individual youngsters. It is to be hoped, too, that means of community involvement in schools will continue to be community chosen and directed.

As we continue to seek ways of providing better senior high schools throughout the United States, perhaps we should work for greater uniformity in quality of educational programs and processes rather than in quantitative standards and requirements as to courses and instructional organization. Three areas for continued study offer particular promise of improved quality:

1. The determination and promotion of teaching behavior which stimulates youth's will to learn
2. The continuous selection and dis-

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book (1960) of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics is entitled, The Growth of Mathematical Ideas, Grades K through 12. Good bibliographies are seldom easy to come by and are always valuable to have. This one was developed on the sound assumption that differentiated assignments stimulate higher achievements among pupils in mathematics.


The materials in this bulletin have been tested by all Minneapolis health and physical education teachers over the past three years. Carefully considered objectives are listed. Plans for organizing the program are set forth, and the elements of the program are described in detail for each grade, for boys and for girls. Scope and sequence are carefully delineated; major emphases and standards are identified; and many ways and means of evaluation are described. The publication is a scholarly one, based upon modern concepts of teaching and learning. It should prove to be a valuable addition to the growing store of materials in health and physical education.


At a time when much attention is being directed toward gifted children, school people need to be reminded of their obligations to the average and to the low achievers as well. This small bulletin offers a concise overview of an area of great concern. It emphasizes that low achievement may characterize pupils of low ability, normal ability and high ability. The report itself, particularly when coupled with readings suggested in the bibliography, will help teachers, administrators and guidance personnel to understand better the problems of low achievers. Separate sections appear for elementary, junior high, and senior high school. Although this report was written for a very large school system, it has much suggestive value for schools of all sizes.

In appraising materials for this column, the editor was assisted by several of his colleagues at Indiana University: Laura Chapman and Fred Mills in art education, John Eichorn in special education, Philip Peak in mathematics, and Virgil Schooler in physical education.

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3. The experimental evaluation of various patterns of staff utilization and of related school facilities.

Extensive study, experimentation, and publications in these areas will likely increase diversity, rather than uniformity, of practices in senior high schools. The average quality, however, should rise sharply.

—William M. Alexander, Chairman, Department of Education, George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee; Vice-President, ASCD.