

# Editorial

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## *Three Essentials in Determining the Quality of Education*

Galen Saylor

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Anyone who is concerned deeply about the quality of education and of a significant aspect of education—schooling—must deal directly and penetratingly with three basic issues:

1. What constitutes excellence (the highest quality) in education and in schooling?
2. Is excellence in schooling an individual matter or should some arbitrary standards be set for all participants collectively?
3. How can the degree of quality of a school's program best be ascertained?

### Characteristics of Excellence

To determine the quality of anything—education, schooling, a ballet, candidates for office, an automobile, an insurance policy—one must have established the unique set of characteristics that embody the sense of quality in that particular entity. The more complete the listing of these characteristics and the more insightful and significant the specifications of what constitutes excellence or inferiority, the better one is able to judge quality.

The failure of all concerned with schooling—students, teachers, administrators, legislators, judges, and citizens generally—to concur on these characteristics and suitable standards for judging the quality of the school's program is the crux of much of our difficulty in providing a high quality of education today. Of course, all of us have some general notions of what schools should seek to accomplish and we check opinion polls and questionnaires with considerable agreement. But, when we engage in the overt task of judging the quality of schooling that our own children or our new employee, or those freshmen students in our college classroom receive, these views often become fuzzy slogans of a cluttered mind.

It is high time that we Americans engage in a thorough, three-tiered project to assist all of us in clarifying the basic functions and purposes of the schools, and, hence, in reaching more readily an agreement about what constitutes excellence in schooling.

*The National Endeavor:* We, as a society of people, should establish a blue-ribbon committee designated as "The Commission on the Functions and Purposes of the American Schools." It should be composed of 10-20 of the top scholars in America today (for example, people such as Loren Eiseley, Harry Broudy, Max Lerner, Wilson Riles, Leonard Bernstein, Burton White, Lawrence Cremin, Oscar Handlin, John Goodlad, Seymour Lipset, and Philip Jackson). The assignment of the commission would be to state the ultimate aim of all formal education, then the broad aspects of life in a truly democratic society to which schooling can make a significant contribution for attaining individual excellence.

*The State Program:* Each state, through the auspices of the state department of education, would be urged by the commission to further carry on the project by spelling out in greater detail the areas of human development and social living in which the schools should provide basic programs of education and the essential goals to be sought in each area. State departments of education have sponsored projects over the years to define the goals of schooling, but I am suggesting a more fundamental and thorough statement. The Oregon plan of "Oregon Graduation Requirements" strikes me as being the best existing example of what I think the state's educational agency should undertake.

*The Local Effort:* The local school system is the primary unit for planning and developing a program of high-quality schooling. Local school authorities should involve all interested persons

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in the community in some degree of participation to define what would constitute the qualities of excellence in the school's program. The reports of the national and state commissions should be very helpful to the local groups by providing a breadth of insight, a sense of a humane society of people, and a vision of the potentialities for the perfectibility of each person.

Documents from these three types of planning should serve as sources in defining the basic characteristics for judging the quality of education.

## Individual Nature of Excellence

Each of us is idiosyncratic; it is necessary, therefore, for schooling to be individually planned and developed if we really believe that each person should have the right and opportunity for maximum development of his/her talents and capabilities. The aspects of schooling and the goals derived from this analysis will be common in their broad definition, but the standards for judging excellence will be an individual matter.

Many of the learning activities directed by the school will be carried on in a group setting, but—within the group—the kind and extent of many experiences will be of a personal nature. The standards for excellence still reside within the student as an individual with a unique set of attributes.

One of the most critical problems in schools today is providing a personalized set of learning activities for each student in conjunction with carrying on instruction in group settings within our schools. I personally have come to believe that we must have a much greater degree of differentiation among schools and among programs within a school, especially at the middle and high school levels.

I call into question the whole concept of the comprehensive high school as it has been defined and used in practice in recent years. Typical prac-

tice in such institutions simply makes it unlikely, if not impossible, for many students (especially those intellectually or creatively talented) to participate in a high-quality program of education in many of our large urban high schools today. We cannot have excellence if the essential ingredients for attaining excellence are not available to each student.

John W. Gardner, in an outstanding essay on this subject, wrote:

Such diversity is the only possible answer to the fact of individual differences in ability and aspirations. And furthermore, it is the only means of achieving *quality* within a framework of quantity.<sup>1</sup>

Differentiation will call for some significant changes in the structure and organization of American schools—changes that will run counter to a half-century of tradition. But what other approach to the matter of quality is there?

## Judging Attainment of Excellence

If instruction must be differentiated and then individualized in part, evaluation of the program must be similarly designed and carried out. This means that those who plan instruction and guide subsequent learning activities with the students should themselves be the best judges of the appropriateness and quality of the program. The teacher must have expertise in evaluating schooling, along with all the other necessary competencies.

I like very much the concept of educational "connoisseurship" and criticism formulated by Elliot Eisner as a basic approach to the evaluation of the school's program. A teacher, indeed, needs to be a connoisseur and a critic of high repute if he/she is to make valid judgments about the quality of education being provided a particular group of students. Teachers will draw heavily on the reports of the national and state commissions and on the detailed reports of the local committees in establishing the broad scope of characteristics

on which judgments of quality will be made and the standards for appraising the degree of excellence.

Teachers should test their own criteria, "tastes," and judgments against those of persons already acknowledged as experts in the field. Hence, a visiting team of such experts should be called in occasionally by the school system to discuss criteria, standards, points of view, and tastes with the local staff, administrators, and citizens, and to render judgments about the quality of the school's program.

Obviously, the teacher-evaluator and the team of reputable critics should have available an extensive set of data<sup>2</sup> and other pertinent material to aid in making sound judgments. The true connoisseur and respected critic knows what to look for, what evidence to obtain, what standards to apply in making a judgment about quality. These same attributes should characterize the teacher-critics.

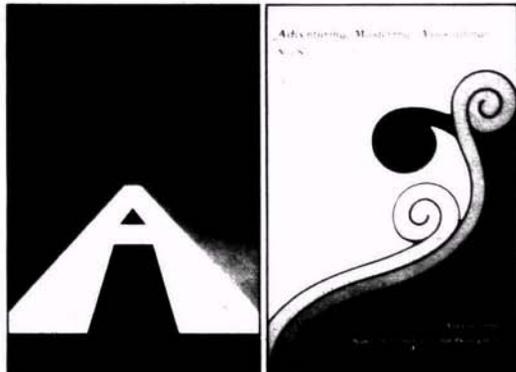
Judgments about the quality of education must be rendered in terms of how well the school is developing the respective set of talents, capabilities, and potentialities of each student for living a life of personal satisfaction and compassionateness in our society. [F]

<sup>1</sup> John W. Gardner. *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961. p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> The kind of data recommended by Epstein and McPartland will be very helpful. See: Joyce L. Epstein and James M. McPartland. "The Concept and Measurement of the Quality of School Life." *American Educational Research Journal* 13:15-30; Winter 1976.



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