

THE HIGH SCHOOL: TIME FOR REFORM!

Whether the high school will survive as a viable institution depends in part on whether and how it can change from primarily an academic to a personal and social growth function. This author suggests a strategy for approaching such a basic change in emphasis.

Of all the levels of education, none has been more resistant to change than high schools. Elementary schools have experimented continuously with ideas like Open Education and affective climate, junior high schools are being rapidly replaced by middle schools, and even higher education has seen the emergence of alternative programs and efforts along the line of community-centered continuing education. Admittedly, high schools have experienced some tinkering with elective programs and a few alternative schools, but through it all, no idea has really been able to dent the subject-centered, departmentalized armor of that institution.

In the past few years, several commissions have issued recommendations for reforming high schools.¹ These coupled with the growing dissatisfaction of the public should serve as sufficient hints to high school educators that the time for change is now. How long the high school can survive in its present form is a matter of speculation. Be that as it may, the suggestions of futurists about the probable changes that society faces clearly call for a new look at the kind of education high schools offer.²

Faced with recent surveys of high school programs³ and the reactions of graduates,⁴ high schools are not equipped to face the future. They are in need of substantive change and real reform. The remainder of this article addresses the kind of thinking that must take place and some ideas for reform that ought to be confronted.

In the process of reexamination, we will certainly confront the traditional problem of the high school; that is, whether the high school is an academic or a socializing institution. Historically, we will find both positions advocated, particularly since the attempt to realize universal secondary education. However, the future of the high school may not be able to afford the luxury of debate. The present major emphasis on academic purposes will need to be reduced as the first-line purpose becomes personal and social growth.

The question of whether traditional subjects will be present will be answered insofar as these may be viewed by youth as contributing to personal and social growth. Where high schools now concentrate on college and job preparation, they will

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need to focus on purposes such as identifying personal values, getting along with others, using leisure time, clarifying moral issues as well as the myriad of particular social issues that will arise at any particular time in the future. Lest we think that young people are not interested in personal growth, we need only to look at the increased participation by youth in religious communes, meditation groups, counseling programs, and the like as well as their use of artificial stimulants that supposedly expand personal consciousness and social skill.

New Curricular Approaches

In order to develop curricular programs that are suited to such concerns, the high school of the future will need to transform itself from the present almost exclusive use of the subject-centered approach to use of the problems and emerging needs approach. Both of these are well documented in the literature concerning curriculum development and can offer high school reformers both a conceptual framework and a history of practice, albeit in limited terms.⁵ Both curricular approaches have traditionally been intended to focus on the needs, problems, interests, and concerns of learners; the former on those that relate to major contemporary social problems and the latter on the more personal, immediate needs of the learner as a person. Both are related to such methods as teacher-student planning, the unit approach, individualized instruction, and humanistic teaching. Further, both have the purpose of helping learners develop those personal and social problem-solving skills that lead to affective as well as cognitive growth. In this sense, then, the high school as an opportunity for personal and social growth and development is closely linked with traditionally "progressive" curricular approaches and will certainly be more likely as they become more common in practice.

Should the high school finally choose to organize its program around the needs and interest of learners, it may also begin to attract adults who see some value in using it as a personal resource. At present, many states have laws that prohibit school attendance by adults during the day (and adolescents at night). As nonemployment encompasses larger numbers of adults, and assuming the school will be viewed as one de-

sirable alternative for using free time, such antiquated laws will undoubtedly disappear. Whether this has any advantage for the high school will depend upon the degree to which the school embraces the concept of community education. At the least, present adult education programs might be offered during the day, and present daytime programs could open to youths in the evening.

At best, the school might become a "life-span" institution in which persons of all ages might pursue personal aims and interact with those of other ages.⁶ Such an opportunity would not only benefit individuals, but might also bring together a broader range of human resources to identify, analyze, and recommend solutions for pressing problems in the community.⁷ Components of such a program might include parenting workshops, social issues discussions, community problem study groups, counseling groups, recreation opportunities, and so on. Such programs will, of course, need to be complemented by either full, lifetime access to free public educa-

¹ Kettering Commission. *National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1973. See also: Gordon Cawelti. *Vitalizing the High School*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development for an excellent description of other commission reports.

² See: Willis W. Harman. "The Nature Of Our Changing Society: Implications for Schools." *Curriculum and Cultural Revolution*. David E. Purpel and Maurice Belanger, editors. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1972.

³ James A. Beane. "Curricular Trends and Practices in High Schools." *Educational Leadership* 33(2): 129-133; November, 1975.

⁴ American Institute for Research. *An Empirical Guide to Aid In Formulating Educational Goals*. Palo Alto, California: AIR, 1976.

⁵ See, for example: Edward Krug. *Curriculum Planning*. New York: Harper Bros., 1957; Harold Albery and Elsie Albery. *Reorganizing the High School Curriculum*. New York: Macmillan, 1962; or Wilford Aiken. *The Story of the Eight Year Study*. New York: Harper Bros., 1942.

⁶ A comprehensive introduction to the Life-Span is contained in L. R. Goulet and P. B. Baltes. *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Research and Theory*. New York: Academic Press, 1970.

⁷ High school educators might find helpful a study of the folk high school movement in Denmark. See, for example: David C. Davis. *Model For A Humanistic Education: The Danish Folk Highschool*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1971; or Robert S. Harnack. "The Grundtvig Syndrome." *Western New York Quarterly* 21(3): April 1970.

tion or a guaranteed voucher for a specific number of free years. To illustrate their commitment to community service, educators ought to encourage the former. However, adults will only attend if they perceive the high school to offer something of personal value and worth. Merely extending the adolescent program may appeal to a few, but ultimately this will not be enough. What will be "enough" will depend upon the school's ability and willingness to respond to issues and concerns of potential learners in the community.

To this point, the main and consistent characterization of the future high school has been as an institution that will offer an opportunity to pursue personal and social growth and development. Undoubtedly, however, the school will be only one of many agencies that will claim that purpose. For that reason, the school will need to address two problems; the identification of its unique role in meeting community needs, and a realistic and cooperative alignment with other community agencies that might participate in personal and social growth.

Community Cooperation

One of the hardest criticisms that the high school currently faces is that it has failed to solve the social problems of youth. For many years, the school has willingly taken on responsibility for dealing with the variety of such problems as they have arisen. These include racism, drug abuse, alcoholism, smoking, value development, moral dilemmas, health problems, and even driver education. In addition, the traditional academic schools have agreed to the addition of vocational or trade preparation to their programs in response to reasoning that held that possession of a salable skill would necessarily mean employment. No doubt all of these were taken on with the best of intentions by educators who were willing to make the school whatever it needed to be to guide youth to adulthood. To their dismay, those educators are now learning that either they failed to inform, or the public failed to understand that the school, as only one piece of adolescent living, could not guarantee the solution of those problems. As a result, the schools are undergoing a singular scrutiny from which other youth-oriented institutions and agencies are most often exempt. To make matters worse, some schools are conse-

quently attempting to build a singular defense based upon efforts made.

In order to survive the criticism, they might better expend efforts at defining the role of the school as one community agency.⁸ Certainly such youth-interested groups or organizations as churches, YM/YWCA's, scouts, youth clubs, police, medical groups, and counseling centers play a role in the lives of adolescents. With that general category, the school fits as an interest-integrating agency which, while concerned with common needs of all persons, must be supplemented by specialized agencies. Thus the school must offer the leadership to bring together representatives of all groups and institutions to determine who is responsible for what and how those responsibilities might best be met.

In addition, leadership must also encourage evaluation of the degree to which the various agencies are meeting their respective responsibilities and determination of how cooperation might improve efforts. One type of program that may enjoy new status is the community service project now encouraged in some schools through which youths gain credit by participating in a variety of voluntary activities related to environmental problems, problems of handicapped persons, and the like.⁹ Finally, the school might visibly demonstrate commitment to cooperation by beginning to seek ways to share not only programs, but facilities. Part- or fulltime offices for medical doctors, psychologists, and youth agencies might be set up in the school as a means to bring the school in closer connection with other aspects of youth living. As adults make increasing use of the school, local libraries, counseling services, and adult complements to youth agencies might also use school facilities.

Another aspect of the community-at-large with which the school will need to examine its relationship is technology and the media. Traditionally, the high school has been viewed as a source of information dissemination, both directly and indirectly through development of skills

⁸ This concept is more thoroughly discussed in: Lawrence A. Cremin. *Public Education*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976.

⁹ See: Lawrence W. Aronstein and Edward G. Olsen. *Action Learning: Student Community Service*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1974.

necessary to gather and process data. The past two decades have been highlighted by astonishing advancements in development and availability of technology and media.¹⁰ The need to read as a means to gathering information has been altered by the massive and instantaneous ability of television to report and analyze news (we are, in fact, the first generation to be able to view a foreign war at firsthand). The need for computing skill has been challenged by pocket calculators, credit card buying, and banking and computerized pricing. The limits of firsthand cultural experiences and intellectual analyses have been reduced by public and local cable television and, more recently, commercially televised book serials. The need to write has been challenged by television, cassette tape recorders, and citizen band radios. These few examples are already being extended by commercially available home computers and video recorders.

In defining its uniqueness, then, the high school cannot survive as an information source alone. Not only should the high school recognize the advances of technology and media, it must recognize that its future potential enrollees will not accept unnecessary or more primitive duplication. On the other hand, the school may, and must, build its identity on the idea that it can offer direct, local interaction on personal and social issues under the guidance of professional educators. Such interaction among and between peer and age groups may ultimately offer not only the vehicle for localizing problem solving and technology application, but might also provide a critical means for reducing the alienation that is inevitably attached to advancing technology.

The school, therefore, stripped of even its most basic present identity may reemerge on the basis of what many consider as a peripheral purpose: the opportunity for socializing. Some futurists, incidentally, have suggested that, for this reason, the school might be the only present institution whose essential form will survive the post-industrial future.¹¹ Hopefully this prediction will hold true for the school, at least, but this again will depend upon the school's willingness to be responsive to its role in the community and its relationship to other community factors.

In order to cope with declining enrollment and develop new programs, high school teachers

will also have to reconsider their professional roles. Some of the energy now expended in developing subject area expertise will need to be spent increasing understanding of learners as people and in developing skill at helping learners work on personal and social problems. Obviously the degree to which the latter are effective will depend upon professional skill in their planning and implementation. Another concern will have to do with the working conditions of the professional staff. As a result of limited enrollment and/or program changes, some staff may work less than a five-day week while others may work only during portions of the year. Whether the time difference will be used for planning or leisure will probably be determined by some combination of bargaining and personal preference. Finally, the size and nature of the professional staff may be a variable factor. For example, specialists in one or another area of human development may become adjunct, regular, or parttime members of the staff to deal with some specific problem or need. Such persons may be similar to those employed now by other community agencies or possibly paid volunteer community resources. At any rate, the present reluctance of bargaining agents to consider unusual staff arrangements may have to be tempered to encourage reform of the high school.

Conclusion

To begin the process of reform, every high school should develop means to take on two important tasks. First, each should organize a school-community task force to identify, analyze, and make recommendations regarding the developmental needs, characteristics, problems, and concerns of adolescents and adults as those relate to personal and social growth. If the latter is to become a major focus of the high school, systematic groundwork must be done to construct the basis for future program planning. This identification of developmental problems will thus provide the initial impetus for the major task of

¹⁰ Professors of Educational Administration (1985 Committee). *Educational Futurism, 1985*. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1971.

¹¹ See, for example: Buckminster Fuller. *Education Automation*. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971.

specific curriculum planning. Second, each high school should organize a school-community task force to identify, analyze, and make recommendations regarding social issues and problems that may concern people locally and otherwise in the future. Work done here will give the dual advantage of providing an opportunity to think about the future of the local community as well as the kinds of issues with which the school might become involved and for which curriculum planning will need to be undertaken.

Those who are abreast of current trends in high school education should recognize a number of road signs that suggest that the future of the high school may be in jeopardy. Dissatisfaction with the cost, quality, and custodial nature of present high schools has led several groups to recommend what amounts to the end of compulsory attendance at the high school level. Larger social trends in the future may obviate the reasons typically presented in defense of the need for compulsory attendance. If the matter of high school attendance is a matter of choice without socioeconomic repercussions, the schools will probably have to change to survive and compete with other options available to youth. Regardless of that, the introduction of new curricular approaches, "lifespan" access, and community service are among the changes that will support the development of programs aimed at the personal and social growth focus and that will characterize the truly educative high school. On the other hand, duplication of out-of-school technology, bureaucratic and dehumanizing practices, academic emphasis, and school-community alienation are obstacles to be overcome.

The main frustration in considering the dilemma described here is that, if we continue to wait to take action, a disillusioned and disheartened public may give up on us. What is needed is present effort to change. Arguing about whether a problem exists will only waste time and effort better expended on planning. Practically all of the suggestions made above for change have been suggested elsewhere. It is conceivable that if we address these now, the present dissatisfaction with high schools may disappear. At the least, we would have a program that would more seriously confront the real problems of our youth and our communities. That some high schools already have programs for this purpose is encouraging. That most do not is a problem that deserves our immediate and continuing attention. ¹²

¹² This is not to say that teachers should now or in the future be willing to work for unreasonable pay or under poor working conditions. This situation may require a similar change in stance on the part of boards of education and state departments regarding certification and time-job expectations.



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