

# Maryland's "Project Basic"

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*The Maryland plan for competencies in education aims at helping all youngsters toward an effective and satisfying adulthood. The State Board of Education adopted Project Basic in December 1976. The plan will achieve full reality by 1982.*

Maryland's "Project Basic" proceeds from the proposition that schooling is that set of learning experiences that leads to an effective and satisfying adulthood. To be effective and satisfied as an adult requires a fundamental ability to cope with oneself and others in a variety of settings. Those settings include one's family, one's community and nation, and one's place of employment.

Too much of our national experience over the past decade demonstrates that many youngsters are cheated of those coping skills. The catalogue of our problems is a distressing one. Many students graduate from our high schools unable to read, write, and calculate beyond the elementary school level. Dropouts continue at an intolerably high rate. Student disruption is one of our most acute problems. Our schools and our larger society are failing to meet the needs of poor children effectively. Reliable studies reveal that one out of every five adults is functionally illiterate.

As we look at the way in which schooling is conducted in our state, as well as in nearly every other state in this nation, we find a system that is designed in large measure against input standards. Many of our laws, rules, and regulations focus on such items as pupil-teacher ratios, number of books in the library, square footage in classrooms, numbers of chairs available, sizes of auditoriums, rules and technology for data collection, numbers of people attending in-service workshops, and a host of other similar factors. When we think in

terms of graduation, the primary format that is used is the Carnegie unit, the number of courses, or number of credits. For example, in Maryland, that format requires four credits of English, three credits of social studies, two credits of mathematics, and two credits of science plus nine elective credits. We do not, in any formal sense, ask at the end of the process what students have actually learned from these courses. We tend to focus instead on what might be called "seat time." If a student has persevered in his/her seat for these 20 courses and kept his/her nose clean, that student will be pushed right along.

## Shifting to a Competency Base

In Maryland, we are beginning to change our focus so that results play a more prominent role. Our goal is to shift the basis of the schooling process to a competency base.

Our first objective is to define through intensive consultation with many throughout the state—both within and outside the educational community—the range of minimal competencies that are essential to an effective adult life.

While we expect those definitions to emerge in the wake of that kind of consultation, there are at least five areas to which special attention must be given. The first of these is the basic skills. By basic skills, we mean what most people mean by

basic skills—reading, writing, and the ability to calculate. Minimal level skills in these areas are so essential that their achievement should be prerequisite to graduation. One cannot function as a citizen, an employee, or a consumer without these skills.

The second area is the world of work. Success in this world is essential not only for economic security, but also because one's sense of identity is still tied closely to what we do for a living. With that in mind, it is critically important that young people upon graduation from high school be equipped with the range of skills and attitudes that will permit them to perform well in the job world.

In developing these skills, we must be mindful of two grave concerns—to eliminate the albatross of sex and race stereotyping as we open career options to young people and to destroy the myth that the good things in life automatically flow to the holder of a college degree. We must help students understand the broad social and economic forces that shape the world.

Our third area of focus is the world of leisure time. There are at least two areas in which proficiency or skill levels will be addressed within the context of leisure time. One is that of lifetime sports. The weak as well as the strong, the uncoordinated as well as the athletically talented, girls as well as boys, should have the opportunity during their schooling years to develop skills that can be used for a lifetime of enjoyable physical activity. In addition, I believe we ought to establish and require for graduation the achievement of a certain proficiency level in the area of the arts. During the years when we will be defining these minimal competencies, there may emerge any number of areas within the leisure time framework on which we should focus. But the arts and lifetime sports represent two of the essential ones.

The fourth area in the Maryland program that the State Board of Education has identified is that of citizenship. While citizenship has many components, three appear to be more important than others. One is understanding our legal and judicial system, both the strengths and weaknesses. The second is understanding of and participation in the political process. The third is understanding and relating to others within our

pluralistic society through civic activity and community organization.

The last of our five areas encompasses that range of skills needed to cope with the daily challenges presented by a twentieth-century world. We are calling these "survival skills." Among the most important are consumer economic skills,

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parenting skills, certain mechanical skills, and, in general, the skills for making one's way around in an unfamiliar world.

### The Questions We Must Answer

The Maryland program will define the range of minimal competencies within these several areas and require their achievement for graduation. The responsibility for seeing to it that young people achieve them will be placed in the first instance on ourselves in the education community. As a part of the process, the State Department of Education will develop in consultation with local systems, a comprehensive curricular guide and provide technical assistance to local systems as we seek to answer the "how to" question. It is not enough to define the "what"—the competencies. Competency-based education requires changes in the manner in which schooling is done. Moreover, it is essential that competency definitions and curricular strategies be multidimensional. Mechanical task performance cannot be properly equated with competency. Competency by definition requires at least knowledge, the application skill itself, and elements of critical or analytical thought.

But if we are to pursue schooling in this manner, it raises a host of fundamental questions. The most important is, "Where does schooling take place?" Real competency in many tasks depends on experiences that cannot be achieved exclusively within the classroom. We must reach



beyond the schoolhouse door for optional places for learning by children.

A second seminal question is, "Who delivers schooling?" In the last several years, the "school" has been asked to assume greater and greater responsibility for the *total* education, growth, and development of children. Others must assume or reassume more of the responsibility. Business, labor, the family, private agencies, municipal government—all the institutions of the community—must be considered as potential participants in providing learning opportunities.

Such options are particularly essential if we are going to make progress with disruptive students and students who drop out. Two fundamental factors contribute to both problems: boredom and failure. And both can be attacked by increasing the options available to students.

A third important question is, "When does schooling take place?" We will want to consider a much more flexible calendar, both as to the 180-day school year and the nine-to-three school day. If we solicit the participation of the world outside the classroom, the very least we can do is to accommodate ourselves to that world by altering a calendar that may once have had some rationale, but is now an anachronism. The point is that too frequently the where, when, and by whom of schooling is based on convenience rather than being determined by the educational needs of children. We must reevaluate that basis of making decisions.

There are, of course, dozens of other questions that require answers if we are going to pursue the thoughts outlined within the framework of Project Basic. How are we going to transport young people to additional learning opportunities beyond the school? How are we going to solve the series of logistical questions that will arise with new learning places, new learning times? Are there any difficulties posed by the child labor laws? Will state or federal workmen's compensation laws create problems? What will the form of certification for the schooling experience be? A diploma? A certificate of completion? A computer printout indicating the competencies achieved? What forms of retraining will be necessary for present teachers, and what should the nature of preservice training for teachers be?

A critical question about this or any other

competency-based program is one I have been asked many times. It is: "Are you not being anti-intellectual in seeking to reduce the public schooling process to a range of minimal skills?" The answer is no. In the first place, I do not suggest that the curriculum of the public school system be limited to that which would enable us to meet the outlined objectives. I simply assert that we want to meet *at least* those objectives on behalf of all young people in the public schools. Moreover, the Maryland Project Basic Program relates specifically to state level responsibility within the educational system in Maryland. One could argue that the state interest and essential responsibility is to see to it that all students meet a minimal level of proficiency, leaving to the local school systems the balance of the objectives of the curriculum. I have not reached a conclusion on that, but it is a possibility that I believe to be worthy of consideration. That is to say, there are clearly levels of proficiency and understanding and thought going quite beyond the minimal level that are very important. The question is whether the state should be involved in determining what those levels are, or should that be left to a school system-by-system determination? In addition, I would suggest the obvious, that is, that without the minimal skill levels to which I have referred, the complexity and subtlety associated with the pursuit of higher learning is not possible.

## The Principles of Schooling

A corollary question to the anti-intellectual one, and one that is raised frequently is: "Are you not focusing on the cognitive and objective in a manner that does not recognize the significance of the affective or those parts of our life together that cannot be reduced to measureable units?"

School, as with life, is more than measurable skills. Schools have a wider responsibility in the education of our youth. Much of that responsibility is contained in six principles, which the State Board of Education has made a part of the Mission of Schooling.

Briefly, the six points are:

1. Every student should become expert or at least very good at something. The area may be vocational or avocational, community- or family-



based, but genuine success in some activity is essential to every human being.

2. Every student should understand the importance of developing and maintaining two or three close relationships to other people. That requires considerable effort, as caring about another person is hard work. But life without it is filled with insecurity and loneliness.

3. Every student should learn to have fun. A humorless life is dull and unrewarding for oneself and for those with whom one comes in contact. Work, family, and play all can have a quality of joy if they can be approached with that expectation.

4. Every student should be helped to develop a delicate balance between looking at the world optimistically on the one hand and with skepticism on the other.

5. Every student should be encouraged to be a participant—a doer—not just an observer. One can help decide whether he/she will passively accept what life brings or will play a significant role in shaping his/her own destiny.

6. All students should be led to expect much of themselves. If that occurs, much will result. In contrast, if little is expected, it will result in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Maryland State Board of Education adopted the broad outlines of Project Basic on December 22, 1976. Since then, we have adopted grade-by-grade minimal competencies in reading. Those in mathematics will be adopted by the end of 1977. A team of eight carefully chosen professionals has been recruited under the leadership of Floretta McKenzie, Assistant Deputy State Superintendent. Our aim is to bring Project Basic to full reality in 1982. [E]



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# National Curriculum Study Institutes

## Winter 1977-78



### Effective Staff Development

December 5-6, 1977, New York (Americana Hotel)

The fact that fewer new and younger educators are entering the profession, and the accelerated accumulation of new instructional knowledge and techniques, document the need for continuous professional growth through staff development programs. This institute is designed to assist professionals in designing better staff development experiences by examining different conceptualizations, techniques, and programs of professional growth and development now in existence that have proven to be successful.

Consultants: George Henderson, University of Oklahoma; Norman; Murice J. O'Connell, Prince George's County (Maryland) Schools; James Hoge, Natrona County Public Schools, Casper, Wyoming; Jerry Summers, Vigo County School Corp., Terra Haute, Indiana; Harry Gootas, Blumfield Elementary School, Omaha, Nebraska; John Chalfas, University of New Hampshire, Durham; Barbara Fischer, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts; Charles E. Speiker, Millard Public Schools, Omaha, Nebraska.

Optional background material packet at special price—\$23. Registration must reach ASCD by November 21, 1977.

### Educational Renewal Through Organizational Development

January 16-17, 1978, Phoenix, Arizona (Hyatt Regency Phoenix)

This program will explore the philosophy and values of educational organization development (OD), a social-psychological theory of the school, and practical strategies and specific techniques for making schools more self-renewing and humanistic. Through direct involvement in serious learning games and demonstration cases drawn from actual schools, participants will see how team training, data feedback, and intergroup confrontation can be used to strengthen the problem-solving capacities of schools.

Consultant: Richard A. Schmuck, Co-director, University of Oregon. Registration must reach ASCD by January 2, 1978.

#### NCSI REGISTRATION FORM

- Staff Development (Dec. 5-6, 1977, New York)  @23.00  
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