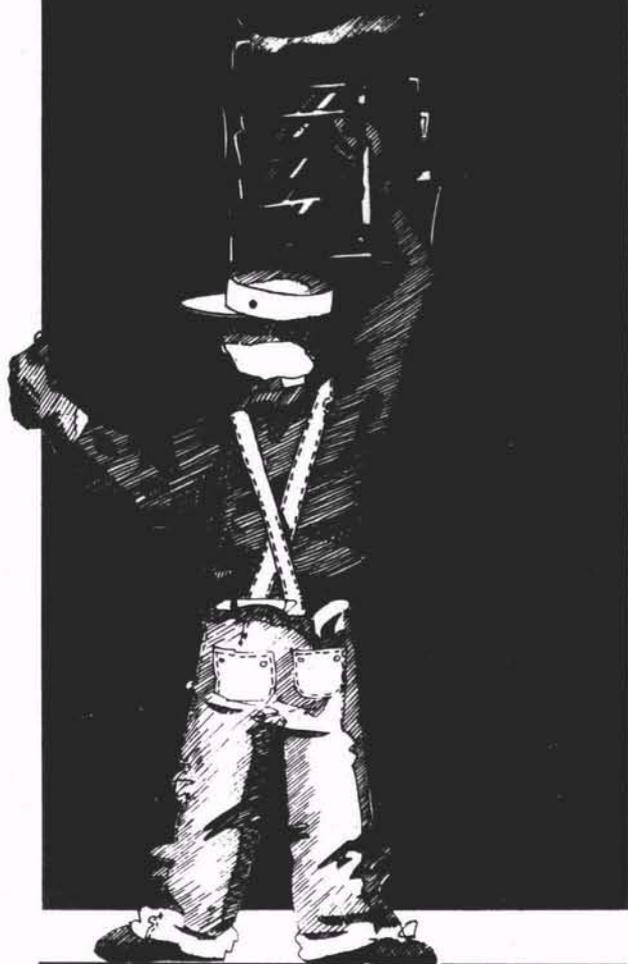


# The General Education We Need

James A. Beane



*A curriculum based on student needs and social problems may not be popular but it is needed nonetheless.*

General education has historically referred to that portion of the school program intended for everyone.<sup>1</sup> The perennial debate on that subject has suggested two basic positions. One is that all youth should receive instruction in various areas of knowledge such as English, history, science, mathematics, and the like.<sup>2</sup> The other is that all adolescents need to learn the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that relate to the needs of youth and the problems of living in a democratic society.

The subject area position is based upon some interesting, albeit tenuous, assumptions. These include the notion that the subject matter included in the disciplines is essential for effective living, such instruction "trains the mind" for solving other problems, and the subject areas provide rigorous education in time tested knowledge. Critics of these assumptions say the separate subject approach centers on lifeless subject matter irrelevant to youth in today's world, is antithetical to the problem-centered nature of real life, and typically deals with enormous amounts of virtually useless information.

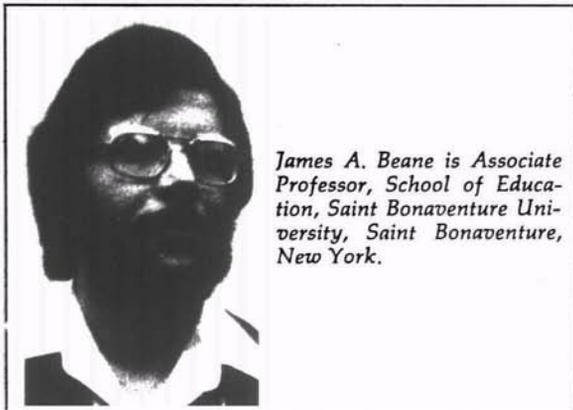
I believe the youth needs/social problems approach represents the kind of general education needed by youth and society. Statistics on drug and alcohol abuse, unwanted pregnancies, suicide, and other indications of frustration are evidence that adolescents today face significant problems with which they need help. In addition, social problems such as racism, energy, technology, violence, unemployment, and the like are not only more compelling, but far more real than the problems posed by school subjects. This does not mean that subject matter is useless, but that it should be organized and used as it is pertinent to real problems of living.

The youth needs/social problems approach apparently never enjoyed use in more than 12 percent of American secondary schools,<sup>3</sup> and is even less popu-

<sup>1</sup> B. Lamar Johnson, "General Education—What It Is and Why," in Paul B. Jacobsen, ed., *General Education In the American High School* (New York: Scott, Foresman Co., 1942).

<sup>2</sup> George Weber, "Back To The Basics In Schools," *American School Board Journal* 62 (August 1975): 45-6.

<sup>3</sup> Grace S. Wright, *Block Time Classes and The Core Program* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1958).



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lar today,<sup>4</sup> but historically it has had empirical support. For example, the Eight Year Study staff concluded from their data that graduates of programs that tended in this direction were equal in performance on standardized tests in almost all areas to their matched-pair peers who experienced a subject area program, and that they outperformed the control students on most social-affective measures.<sup>5</sup> In his summary of other research studies, Albery noted the same kinds of conclusions.<sup>6</sup> More recently, such reports as that of Glines indicate that the Eight Year Study results appear to stand up in contemporary high schools.<sup>7</sup>

### General Education in Practice

The kind of general education program proposed, or repropoed, here ought to have several specific instructional characteristics, including the following:

1. It ought to be organized around units that reflect youth needs and societal problems.<sup>8</sup> Topics might include "Developing Personal Values," "Understanding Adolescence," "Living in a Multicultural World," "Futuring," "Parenting," and others.

2. The determination of unit topics and related objectives, activities, resources, and measuring devices ought to be made through cooperative teacher-student planning. This procedure provides opportunities to develop democratic skills such as planning, cooperating, and decision making.<sup>9</sup>

3. The schedule ought to allow for time blocks of two or more hours per day as a way of providing sufficient time and flexibility for unit teaching.

4. There should be heterogeneous grouping and interaction with children, adults, and elders to provide experience in a democratic, pluralistic setting.

5. Students should have opportunities to learn about social problems by participating in community service projects.

6. Instructional procedures should include small

group and team learning for interaction and peer relationships.<sup>10</sup>

7. General education, like the rest of the school program, should emphasize democratic procedures, personalness, cooperation, and student dignity.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the moral-ethical reasons in support of a humanistic climate, empirical evidence indicates that it significantly correlates with higher degrees of self-actualization.<sup>12</sup>

The program aspects just described represent a major departure from procedures found in most current high schools.<sup>13</sup>

Many of them are not supported by the general public. Nevertheless, they are important. If general education as described here is that needed by "everyone" and if the other program aspects are needed or desired by some but not all, then the general education program ought to be the required portion of the all school program while other areas ought to be elective. This idea is directly opposite current thinking in which various subject areas are required while such courses as "contemporary issues" and "problems of democracy" are not. Thus attempts to develop authentic general education programs require a genuine rethinking of the high school curriculum. Given the contemporary evidence about youth and social problems, however, those attempts are undoubtedly worthwhile. *EL*

<sup>4</sup> James A. Beane, "Curricular Trends and Practices In High Schools," *Educational Leadership* 33 (November 1975): 129-133.

<sup>5</sup> Wilford J. Aiken, *The Story of the Eight Year Study* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941).

<sup>6</sup> Harold J. Albery, "Core Programs," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1960).

<sup>7</sup> Donald Glines, *Educational Futures, III* (Milville, Minn.: Anvil Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Lucille L. Lurie and Elsie B. Albery, *Developing A High School Core Program* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957) or Louise E. Hock and Thomas J. Hill, *The General Education Class In The Secondary School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960).

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Waskin and Louise Parrish, *Teacher-Pupil Planning* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1967).

<sup>10</sup> David C. Maurer, "Team Learning: How Did You Work Number Five?" *Today's Education* 57 (September 1968): 63-64.

<sup>11</sup> James A. Beane, "Institutional Affect In The High School," *High School Journal* 62 (February 1979): 209-216.

<sup>12</sup> John P. Deibert and Wayne K. Hoy, "Custodial High Schools and Self-Actualization of Students," *Educational Research Quarterly* 2 (February 1977): 24-31.

<sup>13</sup> Norman A. Sprinthall and Ralph L. Mosher, "A Developmental Curriculum for Secondary Schools: Need, Purpose, and Programs" in Ralph L. Mosher, ed., *Adolescents' Development and Education: A Janus Knot* (Berkeley, Cal.: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> Louis E. Rath, "Value Topics," Proceedings of the Affective Education Workshop, Richard Lipka and James Beane, ed., St. Bonaventure University, 1977.

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