

# Overview

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A few years ago I eagerly arranged for a "needs assessment" in the school system where I was associate superintendent. Here was a way to plan curriculum scientifically! We defined our goals, put them on cards, and asked citizens, teachers, and students to sort the cards according to their importance and their degree of achievement.

Guess what we found were our areas of greatest need? Right. Basic skills. And what were least important? Right again. Art and music. In this issue Regina Paul reports results of goal surveys she and Henry Brickell conducted in three communities. The goals they identified were more carefully worded and more specific than those I used, and their process had some interesting refinements, but the results were quite similar. Not surprisingly, basic skills came out on top and the arts ended up on the bottom. Foreign languages fared poorly. And Paul contends the results show that people want schools to concentrate on intellectual development, not character development.

That makes some of us feel like attacking Paul and Brickell. Don't these philistines understand how art and music enrich people's lives? Don't they recognize the importance of foreign language?

Reacting that way is akin to punishing the bearer of bad news. Paul isn't arguing her own convictions; she's reporting the choices made by people who were public-spirited enough to complete the surveys.

The problem may stem from asking simple questions about complex matters. If I had filled out those forms I might have answered the way most people did, even though I would disclaim the results.

Another explanation is financial. Economists, who supposedly understand everything about the human condition except how to stop inflation, would explain it as a matter of opportunity costs. Most people don't object to a well-rounded education for other people's children but they would rather have a new boat.

Communities differ, of course. Ann Kahn contends that citizens of Fairfax County, Virginia, support a diversified program. Nor is support for unpopular subjects totally lacking. In most places, every element of the existing curriculum is championed by some constituency, which may be small but influential.

The point is that schools teach a lot of things that many people—including a lot of teachers—consider relatively unimportant. That puts school boards and administrators, as Paul says, "out on a limb." The limb gets shaky when money gets scarce and tough decisions can't be avoided—exactly the situation in quite a few school systems today.

The real question is why people, educators included, put so little value on music, art, and other subjects that even essentialists like Graham Down of the Council for Basic Education consider basic. Is it because ordinary people are too crass and ignorant to appreciate the finer things of life? If so, curriculum decisions shouldn't be made democratically, which in our society they have to be.

Is it because, rather than providing general education for all students, music and art departments serve mostly as training grounds for a talented few? Or because foreign language students seem so poorly equipped to use the languages they have studied? Are teachers of those subjects teaching the wrong things?

Or is the current emphasis on basic skills and practical utility a passing phase like others?

I don't know the answers, but I wish I did. With economic conditions as they are, with parents a smaller proportion of the taxpaying public, and with the spreading conviction that public schools should play a more limited role in society, school systems will have to keep cutting back and the public will establish priorities. Those of us who support a balanced curriculum will need to think deeply and communicate clearly if programs we believe in are to survive. ■

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