



HIGH SCHOOL ECONOMICS CLASSES ARE NOT TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING

I recently heard a rural high school principal tell a group of local business leaders about his school's new social studies course called "free enterprise economics." Business people like the course, he claimed, because it emphasizes the superiority of the free enterprise system and "alerts our students to the many contributions business people make to our community." When I questioned the objectivity of the course goals and suggested that such teaching bordered on indoctrination, the principal replied (with approving nods and smiles from the audience) that he had no problem with indoctrination when it came to teaching about the free enterprise system.

In observing classes and talking with teachers from various parts of the country, I have noticed a trend toward this attitude. Few high school economics teachers ask critical questions about their discipline. Too many pass along as truth the popular economic "folk wisdom" of this fiscally conservative era.

This is not to say that all courses called "free enterprise economics" provide students with an uncritical view of laissez-faire capitalism. One can't always judge a course by its name. Indeed, we all know that many courses entitled "economics" have been taught with little concern for objectivity, as both right wing and left wing teachers have foisted their opinions on students. Still, in too many current free enterprise classes, the articulate opinions of the economically advantaged are taught as

truth. The voices of the affluent, who have access to television, radio, and the press, are much louder than those of the economically disadvantaged, who especially in these days of supply side economics are ignored. Materials are furnished by large corporations and local businesses, not by the welfare mothers of the South Bronx. Guest speakers are successful local business leaders, not the unsuccessful or representatives of the local welfare rights organization.

A dominant theme, in economics classes everywhere, is that the people-oriented services of modern government—such as education, aid to the inner cities, unemployment benefits, health care, housing programs, and federal environmental and safety regulations—lack merit and stifle the national economic machine. I have watched high school economics teachers transmit such theory as fact. The possibility that publicly provided services are at least as important to the quality of life as privately purchased ones is seldom addressed.

Are clean water and a landscape free of dangerous chemicals less important than spotless ovens or a germ free bathroom bowl, or a kitchen floor free from wax buildup? Are good schools with reasonably compensated teachers less needed than TV sets with remote control? Economics courses must ask hard, challenging questions instead of spouting popular clichés, and teachers must be prepared to avoid the flagrant oversimplifications common to the business-oriented, free enterprise textbooks. Contrary to the pronouncements of the teachers' guides, Mobil Oil and the locally-owned hardware store are not gov-

erned by identical economic forces.

As more and more state legislatures require the teaching of economics (and some specifically require free enterprise), curriculum developers and supervisors must insist that an important goal of social studies education is development of critical thinking. Supervisors should encourage economics teachers to use materials reflecting diverse viewpoints and to recruit resource people from a variety of economic sectors. If teachers are tempted or pressured to indoctrinate students, they should be reminded of their professional obligation to examine economics issues objectively. ■

Editor's Note: For an objective discussion of this topic, see Jack L. Nelson and Kenneth D. Carlson, "Ideology and Education," in *Economic Education: Links to the Social Studies*, ed. S. Stowell Symmes (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1981), pp. 83-97.

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