

# Overview

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## Because It Needs to Be Done

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The high school curriculum, which once consisted of four or five "solids" plus a few electives, has grown to be almost unmanageable. Until a few years ago, for example, high schools in Denver were offering more than 800 course titles.

The basic program, meanwhile, has stayed about the same: biology followed by chemistry and physics, American history in the junior year, Algebra I and II separated by geometry. There may be a good rationale for these patterns, but it doesn't matter; that's how it is and that's how it will be.

Nevertheless, 17 high schools formed an ASCD network aimed at redefining general education. In an effort expected to take at least three years, they are thinking carefully about what all students should study at the secondary level in order to redesign their curriculums accordingly. Representatives of the schools—principals, teachers, central office administrators, board members—met in Phoenix in February to report their progress.

Most are coping with decreasing enrollments and budget problems. But even more of an impediment in some schools is the foot dragging of staff members. Some welcome the opportunity to reconsider their purposes, but others prefer to be left alone. Some suspect an administrative ploy to justify ridding teachers.

Their skepticism is understandable: this is a conservative era and high schools are remarkably stable even when change is fashionable. The Rand study of federally-funded innovations in the 1970s found not a single successful project at the high school level.<sup>1</sup>

Why, with the odds against them, are school leaders setting out to reform the high school curriculum? Because it needs to be done. They feel an obligation to offer students a carefully conceived, coherent program.

These are not hell-bent innovators hot after change for change's sake. They are thoughtful educators concerned about what students should be learning. Carlsbad High School in New Mexico, for

instance, began by analyzing transcripts to see what courses students had been taking. Other schools held meetings with students, parents, and citizens to get their views. All have tried to convey the concept of general education, hoping to distinguish it from minimum competencies, back-to-basics, and graduation requirements as such.

One of the issues they face is whether to look backward or forward. Mortimer Adler, a distinguished scholar whose accomplishments include creation of the Great Books program, argues that a single curriculum for all students should stress intensive study of history and such classics as Plato's *Dialogues* and Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. An opposite view is expressed in articles in this issue by James Robinson and William Stanley who claim there is too much emphasis on the past now. They call for science and social studies programs organized around current and future social problems.

Adler's proposal will probably revive interest in the teaching of some classic works neglected in recent decades, but it is unlikely to be adopted intact except in a few alternative schools. But neither should we expect much reduction in the teaching of history.

Teachers and principals from the project schools don't foresee radical reconstruction of their programs but they insist on improvement. Most, like Scarsdale High School, will begin by re-examining the content of existing courses rather than by proposing new ones. But, as suggested by Don Offerman of Oak Park and River Forest High School, Illinois, they propose to ignore temporarily such practical issues as current requirements, state mandates, and departmental territoriality in order to envision "the ideal curriculum." There will be plenty of room for compromise later—when the ideal is translated into the possible.

<sup>1</sup>Dale Mann, "The Politics of Training Teachers in Schools," in *Making Changes Happen?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978).

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