

Redefining General Education for the American High School

The Cawelti High School General Education Model features five clusters of knowledge needed for life in the 21st century.

The traditional, separate-subject curriculum at the high school level is typically not based on professional and lay consensus on the question of "What knowledge is of most worth?" Our nation has periodically concerned itself with reforming science and mathematics instruction, innovations, alternatives, or basics, while almost studiously avoiding the issue of general education. Since most students spend most of their time in this area, we are overdue in seriously re-examining the general education program and in modifying it to better reflect the knowledge students will need for life in the 21st century.

The high school curriculum should provide both general and specialized education. General education has also been called common learning, core, or graduation requirements, but the term simply refers to a balanced array of learning experiences believed to be essential for all students. Specialized education, on the other hand, refers to vocational training and college preparatory courses. Thus high schools with a very high college sending rate are, in effect, specialized institutions. General education or a liberal arts component are common references in the higher education field. While some reform has been accomplished, there has been so little fundamental re-examination at the secondary level that the term itself is much less well-recognized.

What deficiencies exist today in the general education program of the nation's high schools?



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- State departments of education or boards of education graduation requirements are stated simply in terms of units required in particular subjects. No delineation of subject matter content is provided—nor should it be.

- High schools have been asked to respond to far more societal and personal problems than can be treated in any academically respectable fashion. As a result we see a "patchwork curriculum" lacking coherence.

- Traditional separate subjects no longer represent the nature of knowledge—interdisciplinary approaches are often necessary to understand complex phenomena such as environmental education or the humanities.

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All societies use their schools to transmit their social and political heritage. In this pluralistic and free republic, schools need to constantly help seek common values while also teaching respect for our diversity. This the general education program can and must do, but such a curriculum must be determined rather than just evolve out of tradition.

There can be no one definition of general education. We could never reach consensus even if this were desirable. Scholars have for decades conceived of different ways to organize knowledge. Yet from the Harvard committee's classic *General Education in a Free Society* in 1945 to *Democracy and Excellence in American Secondary Education* (Broudy, Smith, and Burnett) in 1960, the domains of knowledge recommended are consistent. In the latter, the authors suggest that general education include five main areas: sciences, study of social problems, developmental studies in culture, exemplars in the arts, and the "symbolics" of information (mathematics, foreign language, English). These somewhat parallel the areas recommended by Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation (See this issue, p. 582).

My concept of the high school curriculum for the future is shown in Figure 1. I believe these five curriculum clusters are comprehensible to both professionals and the public—an essential factor when local school districts develop their own pattern of general education. These clusters can be useful in ascertaining how much time students should spend

in each area for curriculum planning purposes, and for evaluating the transcripts of graduates to ascertain the extent to which balance is reflected in their general education.

The fundamental question about the general education in Figure 1 is, "To what extent do the required courses in this high school reflect a balanced concern for instructional experiences in these five clusters of knowledge?"

Certainly there are other ways to conceive of organizing knowledge, but *some* framework must be derived by consensus at the outset if a strong program of general education is to be designed. Some observations:

- The content framework should be decided before seeing how various goals and objectives fit into the matrix¹
- Curriculum building should start by identifying key concepts to be covered before moving to more specific objectives
- It will probably take a three- to five-year plan to achieve a well-balanced general education program, as well as good planning skills and effective

consensus-building techniques

- Faculty members must attempt to envision the total program and compromise in reaching consensus

- The emerging nature of knowledge in some content areas can best be derived through interdisciplinary approaches.

The redesign of general education poses a number of significant curricular and instructional issues. How much time must be spent on a topic (such as environmental education) in order to have an enduring effect? If the high school only requires, for example, one or two years of science, how does one decide which science concepts are most important? With knowledge accumulating at an accelerating rate, how do we justify sampling smaller and smaller portions of knowledge with the same number of units required for graduation? And should the general education program be the same for the college preparatory student as the vocational student?

The Stratified Needs Assessment Instrument in Figure 2 may be useful in

answering such questions (See page 572). It can be used with student, faculty, and community members in assessing real and ideal proportions of instructional time to be devoted to the five components of the model in Figure 1.

These issues need to be addressed in preparing a curriculum for students to survive in the 21st century. If full intellectual support and the attendant resources needed for a serious re-examination of general education are not provided by curriculum leaders, it is unlikely that much improvement will come. The forces of tradition, the academic pride of teachers, and general apathy will leave the "amorphous mass" of the curriculum virtually untouched and it will grow increasingly irrelevant to tomorrow's life on this planet. ■

¹Two recent goal statements that are useful can be found in John Goodlad's *What Schools Are For* (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1979) and ASCD's booklet, *Measuring and Attaining the Goals of Education* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 1980).

Figure 1. High School General Education Model.

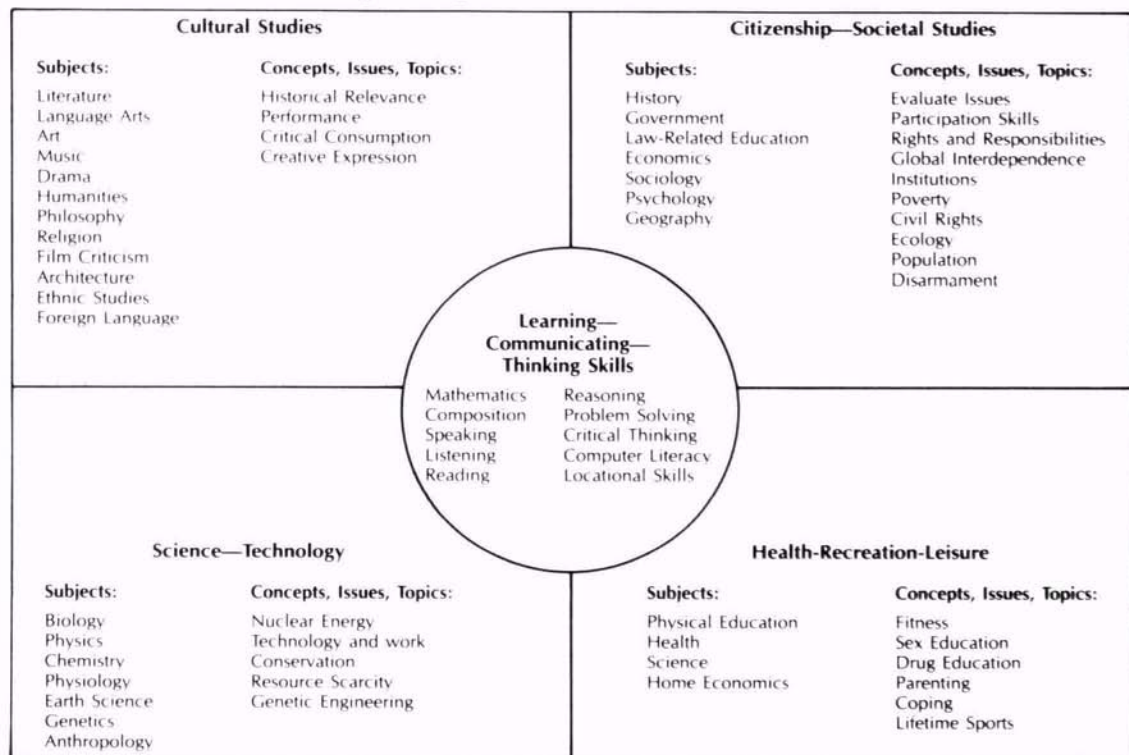


Figure 2. General Education Stratified Needs Assessment Instrument.

Instructions:

1. Estimate proportion of time, on the average, you believe students in secondary schools in your community are spending in each of the five areas (real).
2. Seek consensus on the proportion of time in general education your students should spend to allow for balanced curriculum (ideal).

Real	Ideal	
%	%	
		I. Learning Skills—Communicating—Thinking Skills Subjects: Reading, mathematics, composition, spelling, locational skills, computer literacy, study skills, critical thinking. Concepts/Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve intellectual skills of thinking, problem solving, interpreting, and so forth.
		II. Health—Recreation—Leisure Subjects: Physical education, health, science, counseling, home economics. Concepts/Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become and remain fit • Acquire lifetime sports skills • Know consequences of "toxic" substances • Practice teamwork in games • Parenting skills • Sex education • Drug education • Nutritional requirements
		III. Science/Technology Subjects: Biology, physics, chemistry, physiology, general science. Concept/Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realize impact of technology • Understand alternative power sources • Practice conservation of energy • Help conserve wild life • Ethical and moral issues • Use of technology to solve human problems • Develop ability to think rationally
		IV. Cultural Studies Subjects: Art, music, literature, speech, drama, architecture, history, foreign language. Concepts/Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand pluralism in America • Distinguish major architectural forms • Increase quality of musical taste • Develop creative thinking • Elements of form, composition, color • Interpret artifacts
		V. Citizenship—Societal Studies Subjects: History, civics, government, sociology, anthropology. Concepts/Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic U.S. political system • Historical development—U.S. and other countries • Participatory skills for citizenship • Procedural justice in courts • Collect and interpret data systematically • Understand groups and institutions

Departmental Reorganization: A First Step

American secondary schools for the past 150 years have been organized like colleges, with separate content area departments. We have assumed that an organizational structure appropriate for the doctoral candidate, who needs large amounts of knowledge within specific academic disciplines, is equally appropriate for the 9th grade student.

This academic "cubism" discourages interdisciplinary discourse among teachers and reduces the probability that they will help students see relationships among subject areas.

We thus perpetuate in high schools the importance of acquiring factual information, itself a lower-order thinking skill, rather than the analysis and synthesis of knowledge.

I suggest that the nine typical high school departments be consolidated into three clusters: 1. the Humanities

(social sciences, English, and foreign languages); 2. Quantitative Methods (math and science); and 3. Life Skills (career education, physical education, and the cultural arts). This regrouping will not guarantee interdisciplinary discourse, but it will increase the probability that such discourse might occur.

Chapel Hill High School, a 1200-student, academically-oriented school in North Carolina, has taken the first steps toward such consolidation. After a two-year National Humanities Faculty Staff Development Grant (which released 14 teachers from five departments for seminars in philosophy, art history, Middle East studies, scientific ethics, French literature, and Southern literature), the entire faculty recommended a humanities requirement for graduation beginning in 1985.

The notion of consolidating the

English and social studies departments was so attractive that the seven foreign language teachers asked to be included in the larger group. While no substantive changes have been made in these three subject areas, humanities teachers are now discussing the feasibility of a jointly offered year-long required course that would expose students to 12 weeks of a conversational foreign language, 12 weeks of related area studies (such as 20th century French history), and a trimester of allied literature (such as French literature).

The humanities program at Chapel Hill High School indicates that a public high school can be constructively reorganized.

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