



The Paideia Proposal Isn't *the* Answer

The Paideia Proposal,¹ written by Mortimer Adler on behalf of a group of distinguished leaders from a variety of professions, advocates changing the curriculum of U.S. public schools. Adler outlines three modes of teaching and learning that he says correspond to ways the mind can be improved: acquisition of *organized knowledge* to be taught by didactic instruction, *development of skills* by coaching, and *understanding of ideas and values* to be taught by Socratic questioning.

A broad liberal education is said to be the best and only appropriate education for all students. Electives would not be allowed except for choice of a foreign language. Each school or district is to adapt the curriculum model to the local situation, but all three types of teaching and learning must be present.

Who can disagree with attempting to improve the mind, providing educational equality for all, and preparing students to live well? One could be led to accept the Paideia Proposal for its worthy aims and believe that the curriculum model will achieve them. Unfortunately, the plan has two fundamental limitations: the organization of the curriculum and the method expected to bring about change.

The program outlined in the Paideia Proposal is the traditional subject-based curriculum. Proponents of this approach view education as the imposition upon the student of logically organized bodies of content. It has long been recognized that a curriculum organized

around the disciplines will accomplish some educational purposes and foster some types of outcomes better than others. Studying logically organized knowledge is not likely to help students learn how to learn, participate effectively as a member of a democratic society, learn how to make wise choices, appreciate the diversity of people, develop empathy for others, or pursue one's own unique talents and interests. Knowing this, most curriculum specialists caution against using bodies of knowledge as the only basis for organizing a curriculum.

In addition to instruction in the disciplines, the Paideia Proposal calls for auxiliary studies: 12 years of physical education and participation in intramural sports; a wide variety of manual activities such as cooking, woodworking, typing, automobile driving and repair, and maintenance of household equipment; and in later years, general (not specific) career education. The Paideia group found it necessary to include these auxiliary subjects, which have found their way into the existing curriculum, in order to compensate for the limitation of using the disciplines as the sole basis for organizing a course of study. These subjects have been planned for and taught the same way as the disciplines—as organized bodies of content or skills to be learned. The Paideia Proposal, then, sounds suspiciously like what the public schools have been offering for years, except that all students would now have a common curriculum and no opportunity to choose electives related to their interests and goals.

Elimination of electives raises another set of questions. When does the

element of choice enter into the educative process in a pluralistic democracy? At what point do students learn to make decisions and live with the consequences? Surely this is an essential part of schooling in a nation such as ours. Moreover, our society is enriched by the diversity of talents encouraged and developed in the later years of schooling. When do the talents of the artistically gifted, the budding mathematical genius, the creative poet and writer, the mechanical engineer begin to be honored? Must the development of these talents get delayed past the high school years?

Another serious limitation of the Paideia Proposal is the way the committee members hope to create improvement. The process of change in public schools has been studied carefully over the past few decades, and the research is clear: attempting change from the top down is *not* the most effective way. Commissions or groups issuing pronouncements about schools without being involved in the daily business of teaching and learning have not had notable success. The people affected must have ownership and involvement.

The Paideia Proposal is interesting, but it reflects a view of schooling with which many thoughtful people disagree. Because it assumes an unworkable strategy for change, it is unlikely to achieve its goal of a single curriculum for all students. Its real value may be to stimulate continuing discussion of the role of public education in a democratic society.

¹Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal, An Educational Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

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