

Overview

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A Rising Tide

Riding through the streets of Maiduguri, Nigeria, on a Sunday morning in the 1960s, I saw a teacher of religion whipping his students. Six little boys about nine or ten years old were sitting cross-legged in a row on the ground, holding their wooden slates. Their "mallam" was striding from one to another hitting them on the head and shoulders with a rope. "Why is he doing that, Izaac?" I asked the driver. Izaac chuckled and answered, "He wants them to learn harder, sir."

Secretary Bell's Commission on Excellence and most other Americans want youngsters to "learn harder" and charge educators with ensuring that they do, not with whips but with heightened expectations and stiffer requirements.

What do you say when authorities describe the results of your work as "mediocre"? What do you do when a national commission calls for stricter standards and urges citizens to hold local educators responsible for making the changes they recommend?

You may feel like responding defensively, but it is probably more constructive to welcome the renewed attention. Hopeful signs, including interest shown by the governors of several states, suggest we may be leaving the decade of the doldrums; education may again be considered a national priority.

The Commission rightly pointed to the relationship between school standards and the attitudes and values of an entire people. Recognizing that the Japanese, German, and Soviet education systems reflect the strengths and weaknesses of those cultures, the Commission expressed "growing impatience with shoddiness in many walks of American life." From that standpoint, educators can rejoice in the recent stream of reports dramatizing the plight of American schools. We too want intellectually stimulating programs, creative and well-educated teachers, ambitious and hard-working students, interested parents, supportive communities—and we know these things are interdependent; no school is an island.

The danger is that the simplest and most authoritarian recommendations will be adopted without the more far-reaching provisions that would bring genuine excellence. For example, most states and school districts are sure to increase graduation requirements.

Courses in English, social studies, science, and mathematics can be beneficial to almost anyone, depending on their content and the way they are taught; but trying to

make large numbers of students learn harder by forcing them into such courses without extensive curriculum revision and staff development will probably not produce a commitment to quality.

Most of the 17 high schools in ASCD's network on Redefining General Education in the American Secondary School challenged their faculties to think outside subject matter lines to identify elements of what all students need to learn. When they had defined those elements, staff members (and sometimes students) inventoried existing courses to see where those elements were being taught. Only then did the schools make plans to change requirements and revise the content of existing courses.

Fortunately, the ASCD project began in 1981 when there were fewer pressures for immediate action. Thinking through what constitutes a coherent general education curriculum takes time, especially if parents and community leaders are to be involved.

When new requirements are adopted abruptly, we should protect freedom of choice where we can. Instead of telling all students, "You must do this!" schools may be able to:

- Publish lists of "highly recommended" courses for the *advice* of students and their parents
- Offer honors diplomas to students completing a specified set of academic courses
- Provide a choice of several ways to satisfy a particular requirement
- Provide ways for students to be excused from a requirement if they demonstrate proficiency
- Provide for some authority to waive a requirement in individual cases when it seems reasonable
- Protect alternative programs, including different requirements, for students and their parents seeking their own conception of excellence.

True, provisions like these are more difficult to administer, and they raise the possibility that a few students may get by with doing less. But people often learn much harder when pursuing goals they have set for themselves. □

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