

The New Basics for Everyone?

In *A Nation at Risk*,¹ the National Commission on Excellence in Education strongly recommended that all students be required to take the "New Basics": four years of English; three years of mathematics, science, and social studies; and one-half year of computer science. We asked a panel of educators to comment.

How Could Anyone Disagree?

CHESTER E. FINN, JR.

I'm hard-pressed to imagine how anyone could disagree with the Excellence Commission's curriculum recommendations—or, for that matter, with the Commission's other diagnoses, proposals, and suggestions. Many of us have been saying essentially the same things for some years now and are altogether delighted by the enhanced legitimacy and urgency conferred on these propositions by Secretary Bell's blue-ribbon panel.

The Commission speaks of the "new basics," but they're really not new at all. Every good high school in the country recommends the very same package of courses to its college-bound students and has done so for decades. Every good college likes its entrants to bring such an educational background with them. Every savvy parent wants his or her youngster to acquire the skills and knowledge implicit in such a high school transcript. The only new entry is the pro-

posed half year of computer science, an altogether timely and reasonable addition for those who will spend most of their adult years living in the 21st century.

If I have any small quarrel with the Excellence Commission, it stems from the use of "years of study" as proxies for an array of skills, knowledge, and competencies. Alas, in too many schools one can spend three years in math classes and four years in English without learning all that the Commission (and I) would like. Seat time is not a reliable substitute for real academic achievement standards, and in that regard we are somewhat better served by the recent report of the College Board's Equality Project, which goes into greater and more useful detail in specifying what the student ought actually to learn. But the Excellence Commission was addressing the public, not education professionals, and it therefore—I think rightly—opted for formulations that the public would readily understand.

The controversial issue, of course, is posed by the Commission's insistence that all students, not just those aiming for liberal arts colleges, should be obliged to take the courses that have traditionally been part of the "college prep" curriculum in most high schools. (The only distinction allowed by the

Commission is in the domain of foreign language study, where it is much too lax, expecting just two years of foreign language study for the college-bound and apparently none for others; whereas in my view reasonable mastery of at least one foreign language should be expected of everyone.) What of the "general," the "commercial," or the "vocational" student?

The Commission is correct to make no such distinctions. To consign the "non-college" students to a less rigorous academic education is to sentence them to second-class citizenship, and to condone the perpetuation of social inequality. As educators, we dare not succumb once again to the misguided progressivism that, in the name of liberalism, ends up fostering injustice. If we regard secondary education as preparation for full-fledged participation in American society, then we must expect every future citizen to acquire the cognitive skills, knowledge, values, and competencies that are needed for successful participation in our complex modern culture, polity, and economy. There is not a single vocational skill that cannot

¹Available at \$4.50 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Ordering number 065-00000-1772.

be gained quickly and confidently through on-the-job training (or post-secondary education) by a young person who has already attained the educational plateau mapped by the Excellence Commission.

As for the suggestion that uniform high standards will induce failure or dropouts among more young people, I suggest that it is precisely that kind of sloppy thinking and feckless sentimentality that got us into the situation the Excellence Commission quite properly portrayed in vivid, stinging language. The challenge to professional educators is not to invent spurious rationales for letting some youngsters off the hook, but to devise pedagogies and curricula that will make it possible for every reasonably motivated youngster (save perhaps the seriously retarded) to be educationally successful according to the terms that the Commission sets forth—and that society has fervently endorsed. This will not be easy or costless, but the proper response to the Commission's challenge is to figure out how it can be met, not to dream up excuses for circumventing it. □

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A Dangerous Smokescreen

GORDON DONALDSON

Beware the pat solution. The Commission's recommendations are sound, but we should not be fooled into thinking the course requirement prescription is centrally important. Our students clearly need continued practice and instruction in the four basic content areas in order to consolidate and deepen necessary skills and understandings. But to think this can be accomplished by simply increasing requirements is extremely dangerous.

The quality of student learning is not most significantly dependent on the quantity of courses taken, but on the quality of instruction. Our efforts as educators and our hopes as parents and citizens will be misdirected if we fail to

recognize the primacy of some of the Commission's other recommendations: those dealing with expectations and teaching practices. We need to concentrate on what is happening inside the classrooms and inside the minds of students involved in those additional courses. One more dose of pabulum cannot substitute for a hearty meal.

The recommendation for more courses, made in isolation, leaves the educational mission dangerously vulnerable to political and media game-playing. Most citizens can and will grasp that recommendation and bandy it about; we have heard it and will continue to hear it in school board meetings, in the media, on the street corner, and at cocktail parties. Because it's easy to remember, this single "content" recommendation will produce a dangerous smokescreen for the more crucial recommendations of the report, preventing or hindering badly needed reform in the "process area" of instruction. We should encourage fellow teachers, administrators, and citizens to pursue the goals of the Commission. Let's simply make sure we direct our limited energies at the most urgent targets. □

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Naiveté and Snobbery

BARBARA BENHAM TYE
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Academic preparation is important, but it has never been the only purpose of the American high school. As a people, we have expected schools to prepare students for cooperative lives as active participants in a democracy. We have asked them to help students develop self-confidence, set personal goals, and clarify personal values. We have required schools to prepare young adults to enter the world of work. And we have always valued the development of academic skills and critical thinking abilities.

All four functions—social, personal, vocational, intellectual—are important, and *all four* are still held in high esteem by ordinary American students, teachers, and parents, as *A Study of Schooling* reveals.¹ The idea of the comprehensive school preparing young people for life has shaped our assumptions about high schools for the past 65 years, despite occasional challenges from groups favoring a narrower set of purposes.²

In a nobler time than the present, we also made a national commitment to equality of educational opportunity. The thoughtful effort of the 1960s did *not* imply that every child should have the same educational experiences. Nor was it ever expected that all students would complete their schooling able to perform equally well the various intellectual, social, personal, and vocational tasks of life.

What equal educational opportunity meant to the policymakers of the 1960s was that no child should be handicapped *going into the game* by being sick or hungry, for example; or because of living in a community too poor to buy adequate books and materials or to hire fine teachers for its schools. As a nation, we seem to have lost sight of this admirable goal, in part because we have become confused as to what was meant by equal opportunity. It certainly did not mean requiring all high school students to take the same curriculum.

The Commission's recommendation that the schools now insist on an academically oriented program of study for every student strikes us as a combination of naiveté and intellectual snobbery. Any high school teacher can tell you it would be crazy to impose a rigorous academic program on all students, and any administrator can tell you that the reorganization necessary would make such a change all but impossible to implement.

Behind the thinking of those Commission members surely must lie the assumption that "any child can succeed in (for example) three years of science if he or she just works hard enough at it." That's much like the social-Darwinist view that anyone who works hard can get rich (with its corollary that anyone who is rich deserves to be rich because he worked for it). Nonsense. Our society is now far too complex for such simple-minded assumptions to have any value.

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