

Clarifying the Mission of the American High School

In the maze of proposals for school improvement, four goals stand out: language proficiency, a common curriculum, preparation for work, and community service.

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While we were preparing our report on secondary education (Boyer, 1983), it became obvious that school improvement was a complicated, demanding task. Indeed, the process must begin with purposes, goals, a clear and vital mission.

In our study, we looked at the education laws in all 50 states and discovered a numbing hodgepodge of rules and regulations. In California, for instance, the education code is four volumes and 3,700 pages long; in New York it occupies five volumes and 4,000 pages.

More troublesome are the vague and wide-ranging mandates the states have imposed on public education. Many of these requirements are pushed by special-interest groups. Frequently, they trivialize the mission of public education and, therefore, are rarely taken seriously by schools. Here is a sampling of what state laws say they should do:

Idaho: "The school program shall be organized to meet the needs of all pupils, the community, and to fulfill the state objectives of the school."

Mississippi: The purpose of education is "to provide appropriate learning experiences to promote the optimum growth and development of youth and adults throughout life."

Oregon: "Each individual will have the opportunity to develop to the best of his or her ability the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to function as an individual . . . a learner . . . a producer . . . a citizen . . . a consumer . . . and a family member."

Maine: "The public school must teach virtue and morality for not less

than one-half hour per week. This includes "principles of morality and justice and a sacred regard for truth, love of country, humanity, a universal benevolence, sobriety, industry and frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance, and all other virtues that ornament human society."

California: "Each teacher shall endeavor to impress upon the minds of the public the principles of morality, truth, justice, patriotism, and a true comprehension of the rights, duties, and dignity of American citizenship, including kindness toward domestic pets and the humane treatment of living creatures, to teach them to avoid idleness, profanity, and falsehood, and to instruct them in manners and morals and the principles of a free government."

At the district level we found school leaders frequently preoccupied with administrative procedures. Educational goals appeared to be of only marginal concern. In one district, for example, principals were called together by the superintendent to produce "performance standards" for the year. All schools in the district were expected to accomplish the following objectives:

- Raise the attendance rate
- Reduce teacher absence to 1.5 days per week, which, incidentally, was less than the sick days allowed in the contract
- Improve parent participation.

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High schools, to be effective, must have a sense of purpose, with teachers, students, administrators, and parents sharing a vision of what they are trying to accomplish. The vision must be larger than a single class in a single day. It must go beyond keeping students in schools and out of trouble, and be more significant than adding up the Carnegie units the student has completed.

Today many proposals for school reform are heatedly debated. But, unguided by a larger vision, they amount to little more than tinkering with an elaborate and complex system. What is needed is a coherent vision of what the nation's high schools should be seeking to accomplish.

A clear and vital mission is the first requirement for school improvement. However, there are three additional priorities and they too deserve special attention:

The high school should help all students develop the capacity to think critically and communicate effectively through a mastery of language.

The high school should help all students learn about themselves, the human heritage, and the interdependent world in which they live through a core curriculum based upon consequential human experiences common to all people.

The high school requires leadership from superintendents and legislators, of course, but especially from school principals.

Top Priority: Thinking and Writing Skills

Focusing on the centrality of language is, therefore, our second priority for excellence in education. The use of

complex symbols separates us from all other forms of life. Language provides the connecting tissue that binds society together, allows us to express feelings and ideas, and powerfully influences the attitudes of others. It is the most essential tool of learning. We recommend that all high schools help all students develop the capacity to think critically and communicate effectively through the written and spoken word.

When we speak of language, we first mean mastery of English. We acknowledge the richness of other languages and cultures, and we have proposed the study of a second language for all students. Still, for those living in the United States, the effective use of English is absolutely crucial. Those who do not become proficient in the primary language of the culture are enormously disadvantaged in school and out of school, as well.

Schools should build on the remarkable language skills a child already has acquired. Unfortunately, reading programs in the primary grades often seem to assume that children come to school with limited language and that decoding skills can be separated from comprehension. An approach to reading that builds on the child's own language experience offers a rich alternative that can at once continue language development and build confidence as well. Once young learners have become actively involved in the writing and reading of their own thoughts, they are ready to consider seriously the ideas and writing of others.

During high school, every student should learn to write more clearly, read with greater comprehension, listen with more discrimination, speak with more precision, and, through critical thinking, develop the capacity to apply old knowledge to new concepts. Patricia Albjerg Graham, Dean of the Harvard University School of Education, writes: "Literacy is essential both for the individual and the society in the late twentieth century, and the high school is the institution with the unique responsibility to assure it." Therefore, we also recommend that high schools give priority to language study, requiring of all freshman a one-year basic English course, with emphasis on writing.

Clear writing leads to clear thinking; clear thinking is the basis of clear writing. Perhaps more than other forms of

communication, writing holds us responsible for our words and ultimately makes us more thoughtful human beings.

Teaching students to write clearly and effectively should be a central objective of the school. But this goal cannot be magically accomplished. Time must be provided to assure that the task is adequately performed. Teachers must have time not only to assign writing but also to critique carefully what students write. We recommend that those who teach English have no more than 20 students in each class, and no more than two such classes should be included within the regular teacher's load.

The high school curriculum should also include a study of the spoken word. As humans, we first use sounds to communicate our feelings. Very early, we combine phonemes orally to express complex ideas. In our verbal culture we speak much more than we write. We use the telephone more frequently than we send letters. Talk is everywhere. Throughout our lives we judge others, and we are ourselves judged by what is said. We therefore need to be as precise in speaking as we are in writing. Therefore, we recommend that high schools give priority to oral communications, requiring all students to complete a course in speaking and listening.

Language defines our humanity. It is the means by which we cope socially and succeed educationally. The advent of the information age raises to new levels of urgency the need for all students to be effective in their use of the written and the spoken word. The mastery of English is the first and most essential goal of education.

A Core of Common Knowledge

A third priority is a core of common learning—a program of required courses in literature, the arts, foreign language, history, civics, science, mathematics, technology, and health—to extend the knowledge and broaden the perspective of every student.

Since Sputnik orbited into space, it has become dramatically apparent that we are all custodians of a single planet. When drought ravages the Sahara, when war in Indochina creates hundreds of thousands of refugees, neither our compassion nor our analytic intelligence can be bounded by a dotted line

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on a political map. We are beginning to understand that hunger and human rights affect alliances as decisively as weapons and treaties. These global changes must be understood by every student.

Today's high school curriculum barely reflects the global view. The world has shrunk, yet American young people remain shockingly ignorant about our own heritage and about the heritage of other nations. Students cannot identify world leaders or the capitals of other countries at a time when all nations are interlocked.

If high schools are to educate students about their world, new curriculum priorities must be set. If a school district is incapable of naming the things it wants high school graduates to know, if a community is unable to define the culture it wants high school graduates to inherit, if education cannot help students see relationships beyond their own personal ones, then each new generation will remain dangerously ignorant, and its capacity to live confidently and responsibly will be diminished.

What, then, do we see as the basic curriculum for all students? Broadly defined, it is a study of those consequential ideas, experiences, and traditions common to all of us by virtue of our membership in the human family at a particular moment in history. These shared experiences include our use of symbols, our sense of history, our membership in groups and institutions, our relationship to nature, our need for well-being, and our growing dependence on technology.

The content of the core curriculum must extend beyond the specialties, and focus on more transcendent issues, moving from courses to coherence. We recommend, first, that the number of required courses in the core curriculum should be expanded from one-half to two-thirds of the total units required for high school graduation. Secondly, in

addition to strengthening the traditional courses in literature, history, mathematics, and science, emphasis should also be given to foreign language, the arts, civics, non-western studies, technology, the meaning of work, and the importance of health.

In addition to tightening requirements, we must bring a new interdisciplinary vision into the classroom and the total program of the school. The content of the core curriculum must extend beyond the specialties to touch larger, more transcendent issues.

Teachers must play a key role in making these connections between the disciplines. They must view the curriculum in a more coherent way. We cannot expect students to see relationships that teachers do not see. Teachers also should work together more collaboratively.

Students, too, must begin to seek out connections between the disciplines. It is one thing to teach students that the world is a complicated place; it is another—and more lasting—lesson for them to discover it on their own. Specifically, we recommend that all students, during their senior year, complete what we call a Senior Independent Project, a written report that focuses on a significant contemporary issue—one that draws on the various fields of academic study that have made up the student's program. This assignment is part of core requirements.

To be prepared to live in our interdependent, interconnected, complex world, students must be well informed. They also must have the ability to bring together information from ideas across the disciplines, organize their thoughts, reach conclusions, and, in end, use knowledge wisely. To expect less is to underestimate the capacity of students and diminish the significance of education.

School Leadership

Goals, English proficiency, and a core curriculum in a global context are clearly priorities that are central for achieving excellence in today's high schools. But there is a fourth requirement for the attainment of the first three: leadership.

For years now, studies have pointed to the pivotal role of the principals in bringing about more effective schools. Our own field studies bear out these

findings. In schools where achievement was high and where there was a clear sense of community, we invariably found that the principal made the difference. Like a symphony orchestra, the high school must be more than the sum of its parts. If the goals we set forth are to be accomplished, strong leadership will be needed to pull together the separate elements in the school and make them work.

Rebuilding leadership means giving each school more control over its own budget. Specifically, we recommend that the school principal and staff should have authority to allocate funds within guidelines set by the district office. Further, school systems should provide each high school principal with a Discretionary School Improvement Fund to provide time and materials for program development, or provide for special seminars or staff retreats.

Principals also should have more leeway in rewarding good teachers. In most schools they either inherit their staffs or are not consulted when the district decides which teachers should be assigned to which school. Principals we visited expressed frustration about the constraints they have in dealing with teachers under their supervision. "I have no control anymore," said one principal. "We have had five weeks of school, and already 15 new teachers have come in—and 15 have left because of 'bumpings,' teachers with seniority removing other teachers. In addition, each year, mostly through inheritance from somewhere else, I get three to five inept teachers."

We recommend that principals, acting in consultation with their staffs, be given responsibility for the final selection of teachers for their schools. In districts where court-ordered mandates are in effect, we urge that principals participate with central office personnel in the assignment of teachers to district schools. In meeting these responsibilities, principals should follow central office policies and civil rights requirements.

In making these recommendations, we recognize that issues of financing and equity, as well as court mandates, have placed heavy burdens on school districts. The impact of federal legislation and the courts on the daily operation of schools has been immense. Many districts have felt overwhelmed by

the seemingly endless specifications, regulations, and detail involved in administering federal and state programs. We acknowledge, therefore, the key role of the central office and, particularly, that of the superintendent. District leadership is crucial.

In our school visits, we encountered superintendents who exercised superb leadership by establishing and maintaining high-quality education in their districts. In a number of cases, these superintendents transformed failing school systems into model ones for the nation.

Nonetheless, we believe that principals and staffs of individual schools need far more autonomy and authority to carry out their responsibilities. Heavy doses of bureaucracy are stifling creativity in too many schools, and preventing principals and their staffs from exercising their best professional judgment on decisions that properly should be made at the local level.

What we seek are high schools in which the school community—students, teachers, and principals—sees learning as the primary goal. In such a community, the principal becomes not just the top authority but the key educator, too.

Rebuilding excellence in education means reaffirming the importance of the local school and freeing leadership to lead.

In our report entitled *High School*, we identified 12 key strategies for achieving high quality in education: clear goals, the mastery of language, a core of common learning, preparation for work and further education, school and community service, better teachers, improved instruction, effective use of technology, flexible school patterns, strong Leadership, connections with colleges and corporations, and a renewed public commitment to the nation's schools.

All of these strategies deserve implementation. However, none are more important to the achievement of quality schools than the four we have identified for special attention—writing and thinking skills, the curriculum core, and strong leadership in the service of a clear and vital mission. □

Reference

Boyer, Ernest L. *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*. Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1983.

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