

Whatever Became of Paideia? (And How Do You Pronounce It?)

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America wants school reform *now*; the Paideia Proposal would require patience, planning, and painstaking effort.

In one sense, *The Paideia Proposal* is un-American: it offers no fast, easy way to improve public schools. This unsettling truth runs against mainstream wishful thinking about school improvement in this country. "Better Schools Now!" or "Ban Bad Schools!" would be suitable bumper-sticker versions of the quick-fix mentality.

To a chilling degree, many of the headline-grabbing quotations from national and state commissions, governors, and legislative committees exemplify a passion for panacea. In contrast, Paideia argues strongly for recognizing the prerequisites of fundamental reform: patience, planning, and painstaking effort.

That may explain why *The Paideia Proposal*, which appeared in the fall of 1982, has been all but totally eclipsed by the subsequent publication of a seemingly unending succession of reports from commissions and task forces. The scene has become so crowded, in fact, that hardly anyone noticed the arrival last fall of the second volume in the Paideia series, *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*. Mortimer Adler and his 22 colleagues in the Paideia Group promise a third and last volume, essays about developing a Paideia curriculum, later this year. Whether it too will be neglected remains to be seen. But it is certainly not difficult to imagine that the Paideia Group has an idea whose time has not yet come.

A Unified Approach

Adler calls *The Paideia Proposal* "an educational manifesto." It is a public declaration that "there are no unteachable children. There are only schools and teachers and parents who fail to teach them." Moreover, Adler argues, the proper role of public schools is to provide equal quality in basic schooling for all, as well as equal opportunity for all, on the grounds that all Americans have three needs in common: "(1) preparation for earning a living; (2) preparation for the duties of citizenship in a democracy, in which the citizens are the ruling class and holders of public office; and (3) preparation for self-development, which cannot occur without continued learning and personal growth during maturity after all schooling, basic or advanced, has been completed."

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But the Paideia Group does more than rephrase the ideals of John Dewey and of liberal education. It reconceptualizes in "three distinct modes of teaching and learning, rising in successive gradations of complexity and difficulty from the first to the twelfth year." This structure is depicted in a diagram of "three columns of learning" (see Figure 1), which "correspond to three different ways in which the mind can be improved." The Paideia construct has two enormously important values in the present climate of school reform. First, it supplies a comprehensive, logical scheme for the central business of schools—a much-needed corrective for chaos, drift, and disagreement. Second, it explains the three-dimensional nature of teaching and, by implication, raises doubts about the ability of schools to handle two of the dimensions, coaching and Socratic questioning.

On both counts, both volumes merit careful reading and thorough discussion by all who profess interest in school improvement. The Paideia Group has supplied a sturdy framework for analyzing the idea set forth in the reports of the other reform-minded projects now jockeying for a place at center stage. Cogent and revolutionary in their implications, the two Paideia books speak to the condition of American education as no other proposal, report, or study has done or is likely to do. And in paperback editions, they are inexpensive enough to be scattered like seeds among school boards, legislative committees, teachers' associations, administrators, organizations, citizens' groups, and editorial offices. Busy people will appreciate their brevity; each can be read in little more than an hour.

A reader with only a single hour to spare should concentrate on the second volume, *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*, subtitled "A Consideration of Questions Raised by *The Paideia Proposal*." The first two dozen pages recapitulate the earlier book and introduce questions often asked by readers who responded favorably to the initial volume but who wanted additional help to understand the principles thoroughly and to begin the process of change.

As Adler explains, "These questions fall into four groups: first, questions about the recommended curricular framework (i.e., the three-columns of teaching and learning); second, questions about the applicability of the course of study to all students and their reaction to it; third, questions about

teachers and teaching; and, finally, questions about matters of organization, administration, and financing."

The answers are bound to disappoint any who prefers a full-fledged blueprint for reconstructing a school. Only teachers and principals have the power to remake a school, the Paideia Group believes, therefore only they should design exact blueprints. On the other hand, readers will discover that *Problems and Possibilities* gives them ample guidance to make sure that a school is faithful in design to the main idea advanced by the Paideia Group.

Two sections of the book are especially useful for local school people. Chapter 6, "A Pair of Entering Wedges," explains in two pages why the efforts to transform an existing school into a Paideia school ought to start first by instituting Socratically conducted discussions (Column-Three Teaching) and extending this kind of teaching to skills now only poorly developed in most schools (such as, listening, speaking, scientific procedures).

The Paideia Group understands that altering teaching means training teachers thoroughly in the desired new techniques and providing new incentives for quitting the old ways and adopting the new. Both conditions are necessary; neither alone is sufficient.

Even with good training and forceful incentives, the transformation is likely to be uncomfortable for many of the participants; thus, progress will occur stutteringly. Tucked away in Appendix III at the end of *Problems and Possibilities* is a five-page essay by Theodore Sizer, a member of the Paideia Group. With candor about how schools work and sympathy for the human side of schooling, Sizer sketches four suggested steps for getting started. The success of his practical advice will depend on the willingness of all participants—teachers, principals, students, parents, central office staff, and school board members—to accept the idea "that Paideia is not a detailed One Best Curriculum, but rather a set of principles, a framework, and a process . . . [for] crafting the critical details of the program in ways appropriate to their own communities."

No one reading the two slender volumes from the Paideia Group should be led astray. Paideia is not talking about more pay, more teachers, more time-on-task, more pupil discipline, or more of school as usual in any sense. Paideia challenges American education to choose among the conflicting goals,

claims, priorities, and special interests that cannot and should not be reconciled in a public school, and to adopt a unified, coherent, comprehensive approach to basic schooling for all. Doing so will push education far beyond the customary boundaries of pseudoreform—mere tinkering and adapting or other modest and invitingly easy tactics that pass for reform but lead nowhere.

A Daring Proposal

A Paideia reform would take about ten years, although encouraging signs of improvement might be evident after two or three. Learning to act differently, not just to talk differently, about school cannot happen overnight. There will never be an easy way for teachers, administrators, and policymakers to stop doing some things and start doing different things. Such change comes hard and produces casualties. Upon reading *The Paideia Proposal*, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, declared, "This book will dominate education discussion for the next decade. And if to some it seems to go overboard, it goes overboard in the right direction."

Paideia ought to dominate discussion, but it is more likely to gather dust and be forgotten. As Shanker says, "to some it seems to go overboard." He might have said, "to most." The impres-

sion that the Paideia Group is a collection of ivory-tower elitists will cause many to dismiss Paideia without even a reading. As intransigently as defenders of any established interest, educators can "stonewall" unwelcome intruders, especially when the intruder is proposing wholesale rethinking and redesign. The Paideia Group, of course does not imagine that its vision of schooling will be realized with some brilliant *coup de main*. But the description of what teaching and learning can and should become dares educators to question their assumptions, to strive beyond cosmetic remodeling, and to work doggedly for needed information.

It is precisely because Paideia challenges conventional wisdom and schooling-as-usual that the book ought to dominate debate on education for years to come. If it does not, the public will drift toward the conclusion that American public education escapes re-examination and self-renewal, that the sound and fury of reform signifies nothing. □

References

Adler, Mortimer J. *The Paideia Proposal*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982.

Adler, Mortimer J. *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1983.

Figure 1. Three Columns of Learning

	Column One	Column Two	Column Three
Goals	ACQUISITION OF ORGANIZED KNOWLEDGE	DEVELOPMENT OF INTELLECTUAL SKILLS—SKILLS OF LEARNING	ENLARGED UNDERSTANDING OF IDEAS AND VALUES
	by means of	by means of	by means of
Means	DIDACTIC INSTRUCTION, LECTURES, AND RESPONSES, TEXTBOOKS, AND OTHER AIDS	COACHING, EXERCISES, AND SUPERVISED PRACTICE	MAIEUTIC OR SOCRATIC QUESTIONING AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION
	in three areas of subject-matter	in the operations of	in the
Areas, Operations, and Activities	LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND THE FINE ARTS, MATHEMATICS AND NATURAL SCIENCE HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, AND SOCIAL STUDIES	READING, WRITING, SPEAKING, LISTENING CALCULATING, PROBLEM-SOLVING, OBSERVING, MEASURING, ESTIMATING EXERCISING CRITICAL JUDGMENT	DISCUSSION OF BOOKS (NOT TEXTBOOKS) AND OTHER WORKS OF ART AND INVOLVEMENT IN ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES, E.G., MUSIC, DRAMA, VISUAL ARTS
THE THREE COLUMNS DO NOT CORRESPOND TO SEPARATE COURSES, NOR IS ONE KIND OF TEACHING AND LEARNING NECESSARILY CONFINED TO ANY ONE CLASS			

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