

# A Practical Approach to High School Reform

In *High School*, Ernest Boyer offers sensible suggestions based on solid research.

Ernest Boyer's *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* is a major work: knowledgeable, practical and hardhitting in reporting our problems, sound in judging what we ought to do about them. It deserves maximum attention from professionals and laymen alike.

For this study The Carnegie Foundation selected an across-the-board, nationwide sample of 15 public high schools. ("High school" means grades 9 to 12, whatever the form of organization.) Into these schools went 25 "observers," who spent a total of 2,000 hours in firsthand study. In addition, the Carnegie staff dug out national data and brought to bear information from schools beyond the basic 15. The result is a tremendous base of solid fact, on which Boyer stands as he weighs the choices ahead of us.

His diagnosis centers, first, on the lack of a coherent set of purposes, of a "clear and vital mission" with the power of a shared vision and the force of a great consensus. That the lack is real is left in no doubt; the portrait of schools going through their daily work without any driving, unifying ideas reminds one of Silberman's "mindlessness."

Unfortunately, Boyer's own prescription of "four essential goals," while admirable, lacks the dynamic quality

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needed to galvanize action. He just drops it on us, without organic development, and then lets it shuffle off into obscurity. I do not mean that the four goals do not shape the book; they do. But the statement itself is never made memorable. Too bad!

"The first curriculum priority is language." Boyer means business; he includes every phase of communication—speech and listening, as well as writing and reading—and sees language as the key to clear thinking. He would have students' language abilities measured diagnostically a year before they reach high school. Those who fell short would have a pre-9th-grade summer. If this was not enough, he would install special first-semester programs—or even more. He even cites with approval a program of two intensive years before joining regular eleventh-grade classes. His aim is not mere formal correctness, but full development as thinker and communicator, using such media as debates. That development he will pursue, no matter what it takes.

"The curriculum has a core." Here, predictably, is the section that the media's speed readers will pause to notice. I can see the headlines: "Study shows schools need more solid requires instead of all those soft electives." And all the moralistic judges of youth will nod portentously.

Well, before they go off the deep end, they had better look at some core items they may not have expected: the arts ("shamefully neglected"), technology, health, a semester's seminar on the meaning of work, a semester-long senior independent project to tie things together.

And then they had better look at the weight Boyer puts on planned clusters of electives, both academic and vocational.

Finally, readers would do well to contemplate the *purposes* for which Boyer wants the conventional core courses taught: "... [to] help all students learn about themselves, the human heritage, and the interdependent world in which they live...." He stresses history, but by no means the history of "one damned fact after another." He stresses literature, but reports with horror a poetry lesson "used to teach punctuation." His goal is the full development of a human being, of the higher processes of thought, of open communication, and whatever else matters in the growing up of an adolescent. (If he'd only take out that fatuous two-year foreign language requirement!)

Here, for me, are both the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of the report. If only all teachers are inspired by the higher goals, Boyer seems to be saying, if only all courses are geared to their fundamental potential rather than to pieces of knowledge and skill, then the conventional courses will do the job.

I'll accept that for the moment. But I came to this book straight from Goodlad's *A Place Called School*. The two authors share a deep commitment to raising instruction from fact-mongering to the high ground of human nurture. But Goodlad is driven to the brink of despair by the realization that *this is the one self-transformation most teachers and most schools find virtually impossible to make*, while Boyer seems blithely to assume that a school that installs his framework will also change inwardly. I am afraid Goodlad is right. Cynical as it may sound, when Boyer's courses are shaped into a "core," they will still be pretty much the same old English and history and math and science, and almost nothing will have changed except the form of organization.

Hence, the real usefulness of *High School* may lie chiefly in its practicable, do-able suggestions. For instance, I have never before seen such a sensible discussion of computers in the school. I resonate to the sketch of a seminar on the meaning of work, living squarely between the core and the clusters of electives, connecting the two. The conception of the last two years of high school as a planned period of transition to work and learning, depending more on clustered electives than on the required core, is magnificent. A faculty could work it out. The proposal of a "term of service" (volunteer or other work in the community) runs far beyond mere learning by experience; it is enormously important because it is rooted in a sensitive perception of youth's idealism and need to serve. The book is a gold mine of creative ideas *that can be put into action*.

Obviously, this report is worth your personal concentration. Moreover, it provides a first-rate vehicle for an organized faculty-and-administration action study. Classroom teachers will take to it because its big ideas are backed up by the hard-headed common sense for which they are so often left yearning.

But, even beyond this, I have a yearning of my own. I wish school and community leaders would put together long-term study groups of laymen working shoulder-to-shoulder with professionals. Let them use the two great studies: Goodlad's philosophical *A Place Called School*, and Boyer's practical *High School*. In today's welter of quick-fix school-reform prescriptions, these are the two fundamental rethinking. They are worth all the effort we can mobilize. Using them, we can put down roots in ideas and purposes out of which can grow a working system, the way it ought to be done. □

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