

On the High School Curriculum: A Conversation with Ernest Boyer

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President of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ernest Boyer assesses the limits of reform, phrases the substantive questions needed to move reform to a higher level, and proposes a visionary convocation of educators—a sort of “Manhattan Project”—to move American schools into true reform for the 21st century.



Your book *High School* was published five years ago, shortly after *A Nation at Risk*. How has the school curriculum changed in that time, and how have the issues changed?

Curriculum has not been at the heart of this movement. Cued by *A Nation At Risk*—and to some extent recently reinforced by William Bennett's *James Madison High School*—most improvement efforts have involved taking traditional labels and simply adding on: more history, more science, more English. I'm not against this effort since in the end we can't avoid converting our curriculum into currency for transcripts and the like, but what's missing is how the various disciplines can serve larger, more integrative ends. So we aren't helping students understand how their courses relate to the world in which they live or to the larger interdependent world they will inevitably confront.

You're saying, then, that the fundamental issues remain the same?

Yes, core curriculum, for example. I get uneasy when I hear that term, even though I use it myself, because it conjures up an image of a fixed number of units and labels. Of course, students need common understandings and common knowledge in order to read the morning paper and converse with others about important issues; but I'm much more concerned that students go beyond a study of the disci-

plines to develop an understanding of human commonalities, which could be achieved in a variety of ways. And yet I don't think we've had, during the past five years, a creative debate about how we might organize the academic fields to help students integrate knowledge and apply it to the world they will inherit.

In what high school subjects is there the most need for thorough curriculum revision, in your opinion?

Two areas come to mind. I continue to be bewildered by the teaching of

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science. I really wonder why we can't more effectively relate scientific discoveries to the generalist in a useful way, rather than offering material intended for future scientists and engineers, which touches only a handful of our students.

How we handle technology, for example, is crucial for everyone and may determine whether we survive. We need more creative work in how to relate the science and technology curriculum to the nonspecialist, who may not be going on to further study but who must act responsibly as a concerned citizen. Asking these students to take an isolated course in biology or chemistry, without placing that study in a larger context, does not fit the bill.

You said there was another area that concerns you.

Well, I think social studies couldn't be more confused. We've completely lost our way in setting priorities

among the traditional fields of history, civics, geography, economics, and the like. We need fresh, integrative thinking here. That's why I look with sadness on what happened to *Man, A Course of Study*, which came out of the Sputnik era. It wasn't necessarily the best curriculum design, but it was on the right track—an imaginative attempt to approach social studies in a powerful cross-cultural way.

Students need to see other cultures in the context of our interdependent world. I worry about Secretary Bennett's treatment of non-Western cultures because our very survival depends on how we deal with the rest of the world. We study Western civilization to understand our past; but we need to study non-Western cultures to understand our future.

You write and speak eloquently about the value of history and literature, as do Lynne Cheney, Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, and William Bennett. They insist that a chronological approach is essential if students are to develop a sense of history, but you differ by saying these courses need not be taught chronologically. What makes you think these subjects can be taught successfully in other ways?

I'm not against chronology. But the larger issue is to help students discover that we are all products of the past and shapers of the future. In order to understand this essential fact, we must place ourselves in time and space. My suggestion is that we start, not with the past, but with the present—and then take leaps back. Several years ago the BBC had an exciting program called *Connections* that followed this procedure. For example, starting with the internal combustion engine, the narrator then traced the theories and inventions of the past that made possible this "discovery." Unfortunately, we usually start with past events and move forward chronologically; and students rarely see connections between the present and the past.

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You don't agree with those who would eliminate "social studies" and just teach history, geography, and so on?

No, no! The term *social studies* has been used, all too often, as a whipping boy; but what critics forget is that the distinguished historian Charles Beard chose that title in a study of the schools in the mid-1920s. The aim was to go beyond the isolated subjects and to help students place the human story in larger context.

There's a related question. Conspicuously absent from most current statements about social studies is any attention to students' own personal and social development. I don't recall any references to that in your book *High School*, other than your recommendation for a new Carnegie unit. You didn't call for instruction in child

development or family living, for example. Does that mean you're skeptical about teaching those kinds of things?

I'll give two answers. First, if I were to rewrite my book, I'd put more emphasis on the physical and social dimensions of students' education. My only justification for perhaps undervaluing that was my feeling that we urgently needed a way to inform students about what I call the "commonalities" of human experience—but I should have stressed the point that birth and growth and death are, of course, at the very heart of our existence.

But, second, I would say that I remain unclear about how formal educational experience can affect students' attitudes and values. I know that "moral education" is important, but I've seen few examples of successful courses that rearrange the students' value systems. Perhaps it is here that the influence of a mentor is most consequential.

But there is growing support for sex and drug education programs.

Society, while it criticizes the schools, expects us to be Mr. Fixit for the nation. But when schools take on such assignments and there's still drug abuse, we end up being called "failures" once again. I have to tell you: I don't think educators, working in isolation, can solve the nation's drug problems, I don't think we can solve all the sex problems. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try, but—given the context in which the schools must work—I'm afraid we can only play at the margins. Still, if I were to rewrite *High School*, I'd put more emphasis on health and wellness and social development so that such topics as drugs and sex could be put in a larger context.

One of the unusual recommendations in *High School*, as I mentioned earlier, was your call for a new Carnegie unit: a requirement that all students engage in community service.

Yes. We introduced the idea of community service to make the point that there is a problem among young people—not of their making—that has to do with a sense of isolation and drift and anonymity. A high school principal on our commission told about getting angry calls from citizens who drove past his school. They complained that kids were hanging around outside the building—even though the school day had not yet begun. They didn't understand that many young people face serious difficulties at home. He pointed out the diminishing contact between the older and the young. So we suggested a service term to stress the need for students to interact with people in the community and to see connections between what they learn and how they live.

If we ignore student alienation in our reform efforts, we are kidding ourselves. There are a variety of ways to make a school a more humane place, to make students feel they belong, to overcome the sense of anonymity—but of course schools can't do it alone. Unless society is friendlier to its children, we're in trouble.

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You've said you felt a sense of urgency about improving the curriculum. What efforts impress you as moving in the right direction?

I'll mention two. I've seen several examples of locally designed curriculums involving integration of two or more fields of knowledge to help students understand what I refer to as "the connectedness of things": to show relationships between the subject areas and contemporary problems or to reveal how past events relate to the future. These attempts to use the subject areas thematically help students gain perspective. They are a move in the right direction.

I believe that specialty schools are also a move in the right direction. I like the idea of having schools for the arts, schools in certain career-related fields, but only if they educate students broadly. The ideal, for some students at least, is to start with their special interest and then work in English, history, or foreign language in relation to that special field of study. What I do worry about, frankly, are specialty schools that narrow the students and don't attempt to lead to breadth as well as depth. I also worry about special schools for only "the gifted" while those students who need the most help get the least.

You have a strong commitment to general education. In fact, it was something of a shock to find that both you and John Goodlad believe that a substantial portion of a student's curriculum should be required. I had felt for years that schools needed to restrict requirements to allow as much individual choice as possible. That's because when a person has chosen to do something, he or she does it with more energy and commitment.

I'm torn in the same way. You can't deny that labeling anything "required" tends, at least at first, to dampen enthusiasm for it, especially among adolescents struggling for independence. On the other hand, I feel strongly that there are shared ideas and traditions

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worth knowing and that an education's not simply an exercise in choice alone.

Language is a good example: students simply must become proficient in reading and writing the English language. We can't say, "Well, if language doesn't interest you, we won't bother with it." There's no way to be a participant in society, even passively, without common knowledge; it's needed both for functional literacy and for what E. D. Hirsch calls "cultural literacy." The truth is we couldn't even be carrying on this conversation without an impressive amount of shared knowledge.

It's possible, though, that if we took a look at what's taught in high school classes, it wouldn't be a very good match for the cultural literacy most adults need on a day-to-day basis.

Oh, I don't pretend that today's curriculum comes close to what today's students need to know. Again, one of the great disappointments of the curriculum debate is the way we borrow sentiments from the past. Secretary Bennett gives us a list of traditional literary sources—but when I talk about the need for literacy, common experiences, ideas and events, I'm not referring to a list of books, I'm talking about a language that is not static, but evolving. Even though I support many of Hirsch's basic arguments, I think his list of "cultural literacy" items may have gone too far. A short, illustrative list could have made the point that while we live independent lives we are, at the same time, deeply dependent on each other and that to sustain a culture, shared experiences and traditions are required.

Your thesis is that we should require about two-thirds of the curriculum for all students. Do you really mean *all* students? We have some evidence that while the abstractness of the usual curriculum is anathema to some students, they'll respond to another kind of experience. In the right kind of alternative school these kids can succeed. Would you do away with alternative schools?

No, of course not. But an alternative school should not have a wholly different curriculum. When I say that about two-thirds of the student's program should be required, I'm not imposing any single set of courses. I only ask that the school establish what it expects of all its graduates, in terms of both basic skills to be performed and areas of general knowledge to be understood. After all, even students in alternative schools must be able to negotiate life after graduation; they need skills to get a job, they need knowledge to participate as citizens, and they need the tools and motivation to go on learning. There can be a number of ways, including electives, to get to individual goals, but I'm still convinced that there are general goals that apply to all students.

In recent years the most notable response to concerns about making the curriculum more coherent, more focused, has been action by legislatures and state boards of education to raise high school graduation requirements. That has upset educators, because they see it as interfering with local control.

You're right—in the past five years the main actors in the reform movement have been governors, school boards, and legislators. From a legal point of view, you might say that's the way it should be. Schools are, after all, creatures of the public will. But what has occurred in the name of reform has been regulatory. Now, that's not all bad. We've just surveyed some 13,500 teachers, asking them about the reform movement, and in general teachers report progress in terms of more requirements for graduation and more testing. But they also report more paperwork and more political interference in the school.

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What we've seen thus far has been a mechanistic approach to school improvement—it's not what I would call true reform. The challenge now is to focus on education as a human enterprise, not as a "system" to be regulated. If that doesn't happen soon, the result will be only a modest fixing of a program designed for the present, not the future, and will be helping the "winning" students, not the least advantaged. In other words, the reform will fail at the most crucial point. Clearly the focus now must shift from regulation to renewal.

There are indications that the flood of state mandates may be slowing down.

Yes, I think regulation has about run its course. We've increased testing, tightened teacher credentialing, and added more Carnegie units, but people are now starting to ask more substantive questions: What precisely should we be teaching? How can we attract and hold outstanding teachers? How do we evaluate results? Above all, how do we deal with common expectations for a diverse student body? These four questions will endure. The second wave of reform may get us into them.

I should perhaps add that the "regulators" have been trying to do right. Mistakes were made, but the aim was to clarify goals, raise standards, and rebuild confidence in the system. And if a better direction hasn't been found, I don't blame the so-called outsiders. Education must share the responsibility too. We haven't found a way to carry reform forward to a higher level.

But if we now have a chance to catch our breaths, what should we do?

I've listed the questions we must now address. I'm probably most concerned about evaluation because, in the end, what we test will probably determine what we teach. Certainly what we test is a statement of our priorities in education. And if we focus on the trivial—if we measure that which matters least—testing will suffo-

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cate school reform. It's easy to criticize testing; my best speeches are about why I don't like tests. But that's not going to be sufficient; we urgently need to figure out better ways to assess our students. Until we do, I suspect students and schools will continue to be held hostage by the SATs or some other inappropriate yardstick.

Getting something better won't be easy.

True. But inaction is not the answer. I wish we could create a kind of Manhattan Project for both curriculum *and* assessment. I wish we could bring together for several years classroom teachers, education association leaders, university professors—with time to really think about what to do. Indeed, I wish the next President of the United States, in his State of the Union message, would announce that the nation's top priority is education. Just as Kennedy said, "Ten years from now, we'll be on the moon," this President would say, "By the turn of the century, we're going to have the best schools in our history. We're going to create a Manhattan Project that will move education reform to a level of excellence for all."

Including extensive work on curriculum?

Yes, the heart of the effort would be a creative look at curriculum in relation to the future and not to the past. School districts could still pick and choose from several models—I do not think there's a single way.

I don't mean we'd be starting from scratch. There are many models already on the drawing board—or in practice. What is required is positive leadership. The reform movement has been seriously damaged by the failure of our national voices to inspire and lead. At no other moment in our history was this nation better poised to move ahead. Corporate leaders and governors and parents and educators

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were ready to be led. Instead, we've been given the most contentious and argumentative issues: prayer in school, cut the department, reduce Chapter 1, vouchers. Most serious perhaps, educators have been presented as the problem. Simply stated, a potentially powerful movement has been squandered. What we urgently need at the federal level is high vision—not ideology. We need voices of credibility, to inspire and build consensus—leaders who see educators as the solution, not the problem.

In the meantime, though, local educators can take a hard look at their own school curriculums.

Sure. We like to look for heroic solutions, but in the end, educational renewal occurs at the local school, in a thousand classrooms, every day. Reform occurs when a principal arranges a better program or a teacher tries a new idea. We have an obligation to think things through as carefully as we can and to affirm our ideas with conviction.

Here at The Carnegie Foundation we try to help shape the debate and define priorities. But, in the end, excellence relates to what happens between the teacher and the student in the classroom. And that's where my confidence and hope are greatest. I am most discouraged when I'm talking to people who don't meet with students every day, but I'm most encouraged when I meet with teachers and students. They have a better fix on what's needed than all the experts on leave from Mt. Olympus. That's why the school-based management movement is so crucial.

Let's celebrate the gains we've made. But I'm convinced the time has come to move beyond the regulations and focus on the leadership of the principal, the renewal of the teachers, and, above all, the dignity and potential of every student. □

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