

On Curriculum in California: A Conversation with Bill Honig

As Superintendent of Public Instruction, Bill Honig is the highest ranking official in California's elementary and secondary public school system. A former elementary teacher and district supervisor, he is the author of *Last Chance for Our Children*, a blueprint for making schools work. Here he discusses California's efforts to improve curriculum and assessment, including the new state frameworks in each subject area.

Why do today's students know so little of what many adults think they should?

One reason is the education community itself. We haven't paid enough attention to content issues. We've talked a lot about pedagogy, about thinking skills and so on, but until recently we've neglected the question of what students need to know to be citizens in our democracy; what they should know about history, literature, science, and so on.

How did that come about?

The universities contributed to it. The whole idea of a liberal education has suffered. The progressive movement got corrupted and people thought it was somehow elitist to require a solid academic curriculum—that wasn't for the average student; it was only for the college-bound. Now people are beginning to see that we need to get large numbers of youngsters to very high levels because that's where the jobs are; that's the nature of

today's society. For example, minority groups are saying, "If my child doesn't get an enriched curriculum, we're being discriminated against." That's a major shift in the last 10 years.

If you're going to make it in this society, you need to have certain skills and knowledge. And adults need to make some judgments about that knowledge for the youngsters' own good.

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You've not only argued that idea vigorously, but you've worked hard to reshape California schools.

What I did first was try to create a vision of quality that included the concept that the academic disciplines are important. So, with widespread participation by teachers and others, we developed and adopted curriculum standards.

Do you find that educators now accept this point of view?

Yes, it's now the conventional wisdom. Just look at your own magazine, published by an organization that was supposed to be concerned with curriculum—but for years you couldn't find anything about science or math or history or the fine arts or physical education. In the last two years, you've had a lot about that.

There is, of course, another point of view: that curriculum should come not only from societal expectations but partly at least from

students' own interests and needs.

Well, yes, we need to educate students to think for themselves; that's certainly part of our objectives. A citizen of this society needs to be able to look at information, understand it, come up with conclusions, know how to argue, and have some independence of thought. But that's part of the liberal tradition; it's a false dichotomy to contrast student needs with an academic curriculum.

Let's talk briefly about each of the frameworks. For example, social studies: what would you say is distinctive about it?

It's not so vague that you can't get a point of view. It says something about what you should focus on, but it's not so detailed that it tells you how to do it.

It's very difficult to be clear in that subject.

A lot of people said it couldn't be done and it would never work. Well, I think we did it. And even the people who had qualms about the framework at the start like it now. It has study skills, it has cultural diversity, it has global understanding—but it also includes democracy in a free society and religion in America's history.

The English language arts framework has attracted a lot of attention nationally.

Yes, everybody seems to love that one. It's literature-based, so to support its implementation, we also developed a list of recommended readings. There was a little controversy at the start about that because some people, mostly from the universities, were skittish about saying, "Here are 1,000 books that are part of the repository of our culture." They didn't like that idea; they liked what you said a few minutes ago about tailoring book selection to individual interests. But there are ideas about the world in some of these books that you don't find any other place. Now, we're not dictating that a student has to read all 1,000 books, but



we are saying that a student should be well-read by the time he or she graduates—which means that he or she should have read a substantial portion of the books on our list.

The main idea is that reading is a disciplinary area like other disciplines. It's not just a set of skills; it's a content area—and literature is a way of helping students find out about themselves and other people.

One of the first signs that something unusual was going on in California was the reports that science textbooks and then mathematics textbooks were rejected because they didn't meet state standards. What was behind that?

It was part of the strategy I talked about earlier: first decide what you want and then go after all the leverage points within the system that determine whether you get it. One of those leverage points is textbooks. We had the framework; we had the criteria; it

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was very clear that we intended to teach evolution, but a lot of the books were just ducking the subject. So we said, "Sorry, you don't meet our framework." That was the first indication that the system had enough integrity to make a difference. There was a lot of pressure, but we held to our principles.

The same thing happened with the math books: we talked it through; we met with the publishers, we went over the framework and said, "Here's where we are now: we repeat large chunks of material each year, and that's not very efficient. There's too much emphasis on skills and not enough on meaningful application." But the publishers didn't believe we were serious. They said, "We've got 15 million dollars invested in these books, and we're not going to make different ones just for California." Even in the second round, when they knew we meant business, they changed only about 15 to 20 percent of their books for us. The math and science books are still not really as good as they have to be, but now at least there's a lot of ferment in the publishing community.

The real showdown is going to be with the history books. Are we going to get books that aren't just encyclopedias? Let's see how well they deal with ideals. Let's see how well written they are—whether they're engaging or not.

You say there are some things kids just should know. That's probably true, but it may not be quite so self-evident as you implied. The well-established approach articulated by Ralph Tyler goes beyond asserting "they just ought to know this." It involves first defining a set of objectives and then, based on those objectives, choosing from the vast array of possible content elements of knowledge that can best accomplish the objectives.

I think we did that. We picked three objectives: *prepare students for work, prepare them for citizenship, and prepare them for individual attainment.* First, let's take *prepare them for work.* With the sophisticated nature of most jobs now, even production line jobs require math skills. Most jobs require comprehension skills, speaking skills, writing skills, thinking skills—and to develop these skills at a high level, you've got to have a fairly sophisticated curriculum. And the disciplines we've traditionally taught—history, literature, science—are the best tools we

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But every discipline encompasses a huge amount of knowledge, and we can't possibly teach all of that to everybody.

No, we have to extract the key ideas. Let's take science. Half of science is scientific method. No matter which body of knowledge you're dealing with, it's how you approach a problem, how you gather data, how you make judgments. But then the other half is knowing how the world works: what causes the weather to change and what the risks are in using nuclear power. You don't have to know it all—but you do have to know enough to have a good scientific base.

And that base is pretty much the same for every child in California—and in Kentucky and Pennsylvania as well?

Every other country in the world makes that assumption. I don't mean everything has to be prescribed—which biographies to read can be determined by individual needs and interests—but there's a core of knowledge everybody needs. There's health knowledge that needs to be transmitted about nutrition, cholesterol, and so on. We have a very strong health framework in California—and we're doing the same thing in vocational education. And now we're looking at personal development and values.

That's a little trickier.

No, you get right back to the disciplines: back to art, music, literature, and science. The values we hold in this society are illustrated through the disciplines. That holds true for our third objective, which is individual attainment: reaching potential, developing character, being able to choose. We give children free choice in this society, but it doesn't mean anything if we don't give them a perspective by which to choose. We used to call this the "affective domain" and think of it as separate, but really the intellectual and the emotional are connected.

I just came back from Japan, and I'd say many Americans have the wrong impression of Japanese schools. The Japanese have a lot of elementary schools that many Americans would regard as ideal—a lot of sports, a lot of music and fine arts—but, most important, students feel emotionally connected to the school. Japanese educators know that if students are to work hard to learn those sophisticated curricula, they've got to be willing to put out the effort—and that requires an emotional identification with their school.

That leads me to ask about the relationship between the new state frameworks and what local schools are expected to do.

Well, we didn't mandate that. All we required of local districts was that they look at the frameworks and have public discussion, including a public hearing on what their curriculum should be, in light of these frameworks. Most districts have been very enthusiastic.

There's still a lot to be done on the local level, then?

Most definitely. It's one thing to agree that all students should have some understanding of what democracy is and isn't, but you still have to decide where you put that information in the curriculum, what examples are best, and what materials to use; those are the implementation issues, which should be decided locally. What's agreed upon is that there will be history, there will be literature, and so on.

Some people have called what we've done a "top-down approach" and have complained that we're supposed to be decentralized in California. But we've had tremendous participation in deciding what we should be teaching. We've not been too specific and we haven't said *how*, but we have said, "This is what a student should learn in these content areas."

That's not a "top-down approach"?

No, it's very cooperative. Relatively few people participated, but that really is not the issue.

I know one point of view is that if you're going to get a school site to improve, you've got to get the teachers working as a team with administration and you shouldn't corrupt the process by saying, "You're going to teach U.S. history." But most teachers say, "Of course, we're going to teach U.S. history—but how we do it, how we make it effective, that's our professional judgment." And that is a proper trade-off.

But then you have to know whether they're doing it or not.

And that involves assessment. The first step, as I said, was to define a cooperative vision and establish a curriculum; next was to start working on a whole variety of leverage points to reinforce that vision. For example, did our assessment program reflect this broader curriculum? It didn't; it was mostly basic skills—so we added writing. We broadened our basic assessment to include science and history, which had a major impact on the 8th grade; when we started testing science, the schools started teaching it. We built in more sophisticated questions, and we're now moving toward performance assessment—not just multiple-choice questions but solving real problems.

The third part of our plan was heavy staff development, although most of the funding for that was taken out of the state budget. It shouldn't have been eliminated, because it's one thing to develop a history framework, but then you have to involve large

numbers of teachers in talking through what that's all about. And you also need an accountability system. To move in that direction, we're measuring such things as how many students go on to college, how many enroll in a third year of science, and how many drop out.

Are you seeing changes?

Yes, major changes. For example, a principal can take a look at the performance report for his or her high school and see how many students score at certain levels on the SATs. The system is designed so that you don't pay a penalty for getting more students to take the tests.

And we've seen huge increases: 50,000 more students out of a class of 250,000 are now taking a third year of science. The number of AP courses taken and passed has doubled in four years. Our average 12th grade math test scores are up one full grade level from five years ago.

Are you saying that as a result of these changes we can expect that in the years ahead, kids will know the kinds of things adults expect them to know?

We've made a good start. Before anything else could happen, adults had to define what they thought was important for students to know. But defining the vision doesn't mean it actually gets translated into quality programs at the school level. That depends on two or three other things. For that to happen, faculties of every school will need to get involved in asking the right questions: How powerful is our science program? Where is it weak, and where is it strong? How well are we teaching writing? What are we doing about dropouts? Do these students understand history? Do they like it? And that depends on people at the local level picking up the ball and running with it. □

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