

## Responsibility Is an Active Word

Sue Keister and Hank Resnik

Teaching responsibility means actually giving responsibility to students. It means teaching important social skills such as cooperation, effective communication, and problem solving. All of these are goals of Quest's programs for grades K-12, now in use throughout the United States, Canada, and 22 countries abroad.

Quest's programs offer students cognitive information about citizenship skills that include the steps of problem solving, specific ways to handle a conflict, and ways to say "no" to negative influences. They also provide classroom practice in using these skills.

Skill application begins in Quest classes when students help to establish a sense of classroom community. Quest teachers and students create ground rules together for how people should treat each other in the classroom, emphasizing caring and respect. During the school year students become actively involved in planning and carrying out service projects. This practice of giving responsibility motivates the students and teaches them about taking action to make things happen.

Quest is a nonprofit educational organization providing materials and training to educators who want to foster good citizenship and social responsibility in their students. For more information call toll-free 1-800-446-2700 (U.S.); 1-800-233-7900 (Ohio); or 614-522-6400 (outside the continental U.S.).

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proved recently, are contributing to the miseducation of all young people through a systematic bias toward European culture and its derivatives.

The report was submitted in July 1989. Unfortunately, its language offended some who, I think, would be inclined to agree with many of its recommendations, taken dispassionately. Much of the mainstream press attacked the report with a vengeance—often presenting it, despite the facts of the case, as official policy. There were expressions of support from other quarters—and there was hate mail, some of it so disgusting it makes a *prima facie* case for a project of this kind.

The Task Force report called attention to a legitimate need in our schools. However, it did not define our agenda for action. For more than six months our staff studied the matter, drawing on their own experience, reviewing the professional literature, consulting with curriculum experts and practitioners, and examining other states' and localities' implementation of curriculums reflecting cultural diversity. Only after this extensive review did I recommend, and the Board of Regents take, any action in the matter.

### A Plan of Action

In February 1990, the Regents directed the Commissioner and the staff to develop, and to submit to the Board of

Regents for review, a detailed plan for increasing understanding of American history and culture, of the history and culture of the diverse groups which comprise American society today, and of the history and culture of other peoples throughout the world.

The Regents directed that the plan address such matters as:

- A schedule for syllabus review and revision;
- A process for ensuring that informed people of diverse backgrounds are consulted;
- Attention to the need for textbooks, software, and other instructional material relevant to a new curriculum;
- Appropriate teacher training and teacher participation in curriculum planning;
- A statewide awareness program involving boards of education, parents, and community organizations; and
- Development of accountability measures.

New York State syllabi are not mandated. Their use in the classroom depends on their wide availability and on teachers' and administrators' perception of their worth. In order to ensure that the goals of this project would be met, therefore, the plan was to include training to familiarize teachers and administrators with the content, aims, and uses of the revised syllabi. Above all, the plan must ensure that syllabus review and revision be thoughtful,

scholarly, and apolitical. Such a plan was submitted and approved in April.

The first step was the Regents' appointment in July 1990 of a Syllabus Review and Development Committee to advise the Department on social studies syllabi, with special emphasis on global studies and United States history, kindergarten through 12th grade. The 22 members and 1 consulting member of this Committee are distinguished school teachers, supervisors, and administrators, university-level scholars and teacher educators, selected for their significant contributions in relevant fields. The Committee is ethnically and racially diverse; a range of informed views is represented.

Assisted by Department staff, the Syllabus Review and Development Committee is reviewing the State's social-studies syllabi, assessing their completeness, accuracy, scholarly integrity, and pedagogical effectiveness. The Committee is scheduled to submit this winter its analysis of needed revisions and a detailed plan for accomplishing them. The Commissioner will then recommend next steps to the Board of Regents.

### What We Will Keep in Mind

As we begin our review and development process, several considerations inform our efforts:

1. Revising syllabi to make them more reflective of our diversity is not just a matter of adding information. It is a matter of perspective. From the perspective of Europe, Columbus did indeed discover America. But from the point of view of the Native Americans who greeted his arrival, it was Columbus who was lost, not they. Life and history are complex, and good education helps students understand its complexity. We must learn to see phenomena through others' eyes as well as our own.

2. We need both the whole and the parts. One of the central missions of the American public school is to develop a shared set of values and a common tradition to which we can all belong. This mission must continue. But at the same time we need to help each child find his or her place within the whole, and create more tolerance

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