

Should America Have a National Curriculum?

Current proposals for a uniform national curriculum reflect ignorance of our schools' real problems. If America is to have the kind of schools it needs, we will need to face up to deeper structural issues.

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The hunt for the simple and efficient way to make schools effective has been a familiar feature of our educational history. So familiar, in fact, that veteran teachers often develop more than a little cynicism that the latest golden lever to improve schools too will pass and that they will remain coping, as they always have, with the multitude of tasks and responsibilities that constitute teaching.

National Prescriptions for Reform

The latest lever for the reform of American schools comes from the highest office in our land. Announced at the White House on April 18, 1991, it takes the form of a multidimensional plan, which includes a national system of examinations—the forthcoming American Achievement Test—as well as a national report card, funding for model schools, and financial incentives for achievement in what is euphemistically called “the core academic subjects.”

None of the proposals is new: model schools have been present for decades, and national testing has been around in one form or another since the National Assessment of Educational Progress emerged on the national scene almost 20 years ago. As far as new goals are concerned, it was only seven years ago that the keys for school reform in *A Nation At Risk* appeared on the front

pages of virtually every periodical published and on almost every television channel providing the six o'clock news (USA Research 1984). Who now recalls “the five new basics,” at that time the newest look on the educational reform agenda?

Although the President didn't announce it, the development of the American Achievement Test must surely be a forerunner to the creation of a national curriculum, since it seems unlikely that meaningful comparisons of student performance could be made if a common curriculum did not prepare youngsters for such an examination. The question this article raises is whether, on balance, it would be educationally enhancing for America to have a national curriculum. Would the educational experiences of students in our schools be enriched? Would we better serve students now referred to as “at risk”?

To answer such questions, it is important to understand not only what motivates the search for the single golden lever for educational improvement, but more specifically the appetite for a common body of subjects to be studied by all our students.

At the outset, it should be recognized that Americans seem to endorse a national curriculum. The Gallup Poll (1987) taken only four years ago indicated that most Americans believe that standardized goals and standardized

curriculums are desirable.

The motives for a national curriculum and, I might add, a national examination system emanate from low-level public confidence in our schools. The same Gallup Poll, which incidentally provides solid, positive ratings for local schools, indicates that for schools as a whole (just like for Congress as a whole) the public is less than content.

The public gives high grades to their neighborhood schools but low grades to schools in general. This is understandable. The mass media do not provide a positive picture of the performance of schools in this nation. Although from time to time the exceptional school will be portrayed in glowing color, when such schools do appear in the media, they are clearly portrayed as exceptions.

The public is consistently reminded that the school dropout rate is about 25 percent overall; they are seldom reminded that in the 1940s less than half of those entering high school finished four years later. The public is consistently reminded that on international comparisons of mathematics achievement, American students rank in the fourth quartile. President Bush's aspiration is for America to be number one in math and science by the year 2000. Combined with current levels of functional illiteracy among the high school and adult population, the pervasive feeling is that educators need to be monitored, if not managed, and that our schools are in a state of crisis.

The proposal to develop a national curriculum is a “natural” outgrowth of the public's feeling of desperation that our educational ship is sinking and that a national examination system is necessary to provide data that make it possible to interpret student performance. It makes little sense measuring on a common scale students who have been trav-

eling down very different roads. By homogenizing local and regional differences, getting all students to run on the same track, and using a common metric, it will, at last, be possible to display more precisely than we do at present how well each state and, eventually, each school district is doing. The assumption is that competition and the positive and negative reinforcement coming from the public display of test scores will be the carrot and stick that will give us the kind of schools this nation wants and our children deserve.

What About Cultural Diversity, Local Control?

It is particularly ironic—even paradoxical—that at the same time that national prescriptions for reform are emanating from the White House and the state house, there is increased interest and acknowledgment of our nation's cultural diversity and the need for site-specific planning. The recognition of such diversity and the growing sensitivity to

local conditions seem to fly in the face of the homogenizing tendencies of a national curriculum or a national examination system.

In addition, America has a long tradition of state and local control of schools. The U.S. Constitution says nothing about education, and what does not belong to the Federal government becomes the province of each of the states. In education the state is the ultimate responsible agency, and the state defines the minimal educational conditions under which its schools are to function. In view of the fact that the conventional Republican platform emphasizes the importance of states' rights, the move of big government into what has been historically a local option seems particularly egregious.

If these conditions seem to conflict with proposals for a national curriculum, consider further the growing interest in the professionalization of teaching. Clearly, professionalization in any profession means having a hand in defining the aims of the enterprise. If

teachers are to be more than skilled technicians who execute the purposes of another (a conception that Plato described as defining slavery), then teachers and school administrators must be more than implementers of techniques that serve the purposes of others. There must be appropriate play between the generalized educational purposes of the community and the particular goals considered appropriate for individual students in particular classrooms in specific schools. In other words, neither educational practice nor its aims should be remote-controlled by either the White House or the state house.

There are other ironies as well. We are also living at a time when there is growing interest in school-based management. When such management pertains to more than who decides where to spend district-allocated funds, it must address the selection and management

One of five important ways to genuinely improve our schools is to enable teachers to grow professionally in their places of work and, thus, better serve the students in their care.



of ends as well as the management and allocation of resources. But what is particularly perplexing is the substitution of slogans for reflective thought.

Consider our need to be number one. The image of America being first in mathematics and science seems initially attractive. We all like to be first. But upon reflection, just what does being first in mathematics and science mean? Is it assumed that being first in an international race means that we not only have a national curriculum, but a world curriculum to be first in? Does it mean that our students come out first on a world examination? Is it assumed that being first in mathematics and science will ensure a better life and good jobs?

Clark Kerr's (1991) analysis of the feckless relationship between the quality of schooling and our nation's economic condition undercuts any argument that there is a strong causal relationship between test scores and the state of our economy. As far as I can tell, there has been no rationale, compelling or otherwise, to support the aspiration to be first, aside from the almost knee-jerk reaction that first is a good thing to be.

Neglect of Structural Issues

The proposals that have been made for the reform of schooling in America are reflections of ignorance and, I believe, of task avoidance. Only those who have not taken the time to study our schools would conclude that competition among the states is a good way to increase the quality of education. If competition was enough to revolutionize and improve an enterprise, the American automobile industry would not be in the trouble it is in. Furthermore, tacit in all of the proposals is the assumption that the most important outcomes of schooling are measurable and that a common test or array of assessment tasks will lend themselves to a procedurally objective way to make meaningful measured comparisons. Such a widely held assumption reflects a naiveté regarding

the ways in which the world can be described and the limits of quantification in revealing what one has observed.

To describe a human being in numbers alone is to say some important things about that person's features. It is also to neglect those features that do not lend themselves to quantitative description, and the features neglected may be precisely those considered most important for particular purposes.

Schools will not be bullied into excellence by a national report card.

The assumption is that comparisons among 50 states serving 47 million students attending 110,000 schools overseen by 1,600 school boards can be meaningful. We seem to believe that somehow, aside from the most minimal of academic facts and competencies, differences among the backgrounds of students and values of the community will be overridden so that a telling comparative picture of the significant educational consequences of schooling can be publicly revealed. I do not believe that this is likely, and I know for certain we are not currently in a position to even approximate such an aspiration.

What is even more troublesome is that almost all of the national proclamations for school reform, including those demanding higher standards and tougher courses, neglect the deeper mission of schooling: the stimulation of curiosity, the cultivation of intellect, the refinement of sensibilities, the growth of imagination, and the desire to use these unique and special human potentialities. Instead, we talk about being number one in this or that, of reducing the dropout rate, as if dropping out may not sometimes be appropriate when

what is provided is not worth the time required to receive a high school diploma.

This neglect of the deeper mission of schooling is paralleled only by the unwillingness to address the complex, systemic features of schooling, especially what teachers need. The President's reform effort has paid virtually no attention to the school as an organization, as a workplace, as a slice of culture, as a community displaying a certain ethos, and as an array of intellectual and social norms.

In short, we have focused our attention on symptoms, and shallow ones at that, and have neglected the deeper structural conditions that impede the improvement of schools. Our national tendency is toward bandwagon solutions: "Just say no to drugs" finds its educational counterpart in "First in science and math by the year 2000." While these deeper structural issues are neglected, funds for schools are being cut. Educators are being told to do more with less. Such a policy is not likely to succeed.

Obstacles Within the Profession

The impediments to genuine school reform are not only located in inadequate educational policy and in shallow analyses of schools; they are also found within our own profession. For example, as a profession we are currently unable to give the public an assessment of our own schools in ways that reflect what we really care about. Our ability to assess what matters and to provide a telling picture of the strengths and weaknesses of our institution and the capabilities of our students on dimensions that have educational, not simply statistical, significance is quite short of what we need.

This shortfall has been a function, in part, of our history in testing. We have looked toward specialized agencies to provide precise, discrete, measured indicators of student performance on tests that reflected more the technical aspira-



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The joy of discovery, much more than extrinsic rewards, can motivate students to embark on lifelong journeys of learning.

tions of psychometricians than the educational values of teachers. We have been part of a tradition that has not served us well, and we have not as a profession created alternatives.

Furthermore, there is more than a little ambivalence in our own behavior concerning test scores. We have a strong tendency to proclaim the educational poverty of test scores and then turn around and use them, when we can, as indices of our own success, thus legitimating the validity of the public's concerns about the quality of education. If test scores in their conventional form do not reveal what really matters in schools, we should not use them to judge our "success." At the same time, until we have something that is better than what we've been using, I fear we will be obliged to continue to use what we believe does not matter much from an educational perspective.

It is not only the state of assessment that influences the quality of our schools; it is also our reluctance as a profession to carefully scrutinize our own teaching and administration of schools. In far too many schools, principals and teachers resist the kind of collegial critique that would, in the long run, enlarge our understanding of our own professional practices. We have too often thought about teaching as something so fragile, so precious in character, so personal that it would somehow be corroded by even a friendly critique. The result is that the level of our pedagogical practice often remains flat after the first three or four years of teaching. And as for the critique of the principal, the principal is the loneliest of professionals in school. We simply do not expand our repertoire very much or our consciousness of how

we ourselves function. Being a principal or a teacher has been and remains today a largely isolated and insular profession.

In addition to the neglect of our own teaching, we have not, on the whole, established the kinds of links with parents that would enable them to understand the conditions of our workplace and their own role in their children's education. Parents are potentially a major source of support; but the back-to-school night is simply not an adequate way to help parents understand the educational conditions that teachers need and that their children deserve. Defining roles in schools for teachers that make it possible to build coalitions with parents is important, especially so for students whose parents might not have the kind of academic background that others can draw upon to assist their children in their schoolwork.

The Need to Question Comfortable Habits

What might be done to turn this situation around? How do we create schools whose faculties no longer make superficial adaptations to the latest cure for educational ills a necessity but, rather address the more fundamental aspects of the enterprise? At minimum, we need to question our own educational traditions and challenge our own all-too-comfortable habits. What do we take for granted that we might better question? I have a few candidates to suggest.

Why do we shift elementary school students from teacher to teacher at the end of each academic year just when teachers have come to know their students? Why don't we keep the same students with the same teacher for at least two, and preferably three, years?

Why do we organize high school schedules so that students change subjects, locations, and teachers every 50 minutes? What occupation can you name in which the worker changes the nature of his or her work every 50 minutes, moves to a new location, and works under the direction of a new supervisor? And yet we seem to assume that school organization is a product of nature.

Why do we organize subjects to ensure that students will have a fragmented approach to problems that are better resolved by an integrated vision? I can certainly understand why a physicist, a chemist, an historian might need to focus deeply, if not always widely, in order to secure a depth of understanding that would allow him or her to make important scholarly contributions in the discipline. But our students are not being prepared for any single discipline. The problems they will encounter are those that almost always require synthetic abilities and multiple perspectives. Yet we organize curriculums to almost ensure that a student who is enrolled in a class in U.S. history and in American literature may never suspect that there might be a relationship between the two. We have created a collection-type curriculum (Bernstein 1971) out of habit and tradition that makes integration unlikely. Each subject comes in its own box and own wrapper, is evaluated by its own test, and usually has nothing to do with anything else the student is studying.

Why do we insist on using incentives that relentlessly teach students to keep their eye on the grade they wish to receive rather than on the journey on which they have embarked? Why do we habituate the young to seek extrinsic rewards that have no intrinsic connection to what they are studying and, further, will not always be there?

Why do we define teaching roles so that teachers must permanently change their occupation in order to do something other than teach within their own school? In American schools there are

basically only two professional roles: teacher or principal. Let us define pedagogical roles more broadly and flexibly so that teachers can spend a year mentoring their younger colleagues, working on curriculum development, developing better assessment methods, creating liaisons with community agencies such as museums, hospitals, cultural centers, nursing homes, businesses. Why do we assume that the role of teacher should be restricted to a permanent assignment working exclusively with the young, 5 to 6 periods a day, 50 minutes each, 5 days a week, for 40 weeks? Where is it written that this conception of role and this way of organizing school is the way it has to be?

These are only a few of the traditions that have shaped the character of our work. They are traditions that I believe need to be examined—and carefully. We ought not to assume that the optimal conditions of educational life must operate within the parameters we have inherited. We ought not to believe that excellence in teaching is best achieved as a form of practice carried out in isolation. We ought to question the assumption that grade levels accurately circumscribe the increasingly broad range of achievement characteristic of growing children and adolescents.

Five Dimensions of Schools

To take school reform seriously, we will need to think about much more than a national curriculum or even the improvement of a local one. Schools will not be bullied into excellence by a national report card. We will need to think more comprehensively and more wisely. We will need to think big, even though in many places we will need to start small.

I close with the identification of five dimensions that I believe we cannot afford to neglect if America is to have the kind of schools it needs. These dimensions are the *intentional*, the *structural*, the *curricular*, the *pedagogical*, and the *evaluative*.

The intentional refers to the serious, studied examination of what really matters in schools. If the development of curiosity is important, we should do something about it. If we're really interested in developing creative thinking skills in our children, let us see to it that they have opportunities to think creatively in school. If we're interested in developing high levels of sensibility and the ability to secure meaning from the variety of forms in which meaning is represented in our culture, we will need to take multiple forms of literacy seriously. For such intentions to be realized, we will need to address the characteristics of our curriculum, the features of our teaching, the forms of our evaluative practices, and the nature of our workplace. We have to deal with all of it.

Although I have my own educational commitments, I am not promulgating a specific agenda of educational aims. My point here is that what really matters, well beyond the so-called basics, needs serious attention. I do not believe it has received such attention.

Aims are aspirations. What also needs attention is the workplace. *How schools are structured, how roles are defined, how time is allocated, are all extraordinarily important in facilitating and constraining educational opportunities.* The structural organization of schools has not changed much in the 40 years since I was a high school student. We still start school in September and end in June. In most places secondary school still lasts four years. During these four years we still prescribe four years of English, two or three years of math, two or three years of social studies, two or three years of science; and all of this is offered in classes of 30 students typically taught by a single teacher whose desk is located somewhere in the front of the room. Grades are still given several times a semester, and upon the completion of a course, the student is still promoted to the next grade. With minor variations, this mode of school organization is virtually the

same that I experienced at the John Marshall High School in Chicago, Illinois, from 1946 to 1950. This structure, I am asserting, influences the scope of our possibilities, and that scope is much too restrictive.

The third dimension we must not overlook is curricular. The significance of the ideas in a curriculum are of extraordinary importance. We need to think about those ideas more deeply than we have, and especially about the means through which students will engage them. The meaning of an idea is not independent of the way in which it is encountered. The design of curricula includes attention to ideas that matter, skills that count, and the means through which students and programs interact.

But no program, regardless of how well designed, teaches itself. *The fourth dimension, the pedagogical, cannot be neglected.* If teaching is weak or insensitive, whatever virtues the curriculum might possess will be for naught. The teacher is the prime mediator of life in the classroom, and the quality of teaching ought to be a primary concern of school improvement. This will require, as I have suggested earlier, attention to role and to the provision of the time needed to treat teaching as an art. It requires a level of connoisseurship and scrutiny and assistance and support that any performing art requires. Put another way, we must recognize that the primary location for teacher growth is the workplace, the setting in which one's professional life is led. Schools have to be places that serve teachers so that they can serve students.

Finally, we must pay attention to matters of evaluation. Our evaluation practices operationally define what really matters for students and teachers. If our practices do not reflect our most cherished values, they will undermine the values we cherish. We need, in other words, to approach evaluation not simply as a way of scoring students, but as a way in which to find out how well we and our students are doing in order

to better do what we do. Evaluation should be regarded as an educational medium, an important source for school improvement. And what it addresses should reflect the educational values we believe important.

Making Improvement a Reality

Current proclamations to reform schools with national examinations related to a national curriculum are a reflection of ignorance and, ironically, a diversion from what needs attention in schools. These short-term policies reflecting quick-fix solutions are destined to fail. We've tried them, and they don't work. But we, too, those of us privileged to work in education, have to get over the conditions to which we have been fettered, the traditions that hamper our

work. This will take courage as well as skill, but without them our efforts at improvement will be impeded by conditions that eventually will overwhelm our best efforts.

We need to address the task of improving schools with the kind of vision and complexity that does them justice. We need, I believe, to think about our intentions and their implications for what we actually do in school. These will surely include attention to the structure of our workplace, the character of our curriculums, the improvement of our teaching practices, and the forms that we employ to appraise the quality of the life we lead. Nothing less will give us what we say we want. With such attention, school improvement might become a reality rather than just another golden lever that brings

cynical smiles to the lips of those who teach. □

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