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OVERVIEW

A Caring Community

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In late October the National Council on Education Standards and Testing voted to recommend establishment of performance standards for all American students. Before the vote, task force chair Marshall Smith of Stanford University reviewed arguments for and against the idea. One common argument, he said, is that "the great diversity of the nation, culturally and ethnically . . . makes it impossible to have a single common set of education standards." Mary Bicouvaris, a teacher and a minority person, responded heatedly that all students can learn and that all need a common body of knowledge to succeed.

The council's deliberations reflect our uncertainty about how to deal fairly with diversity. Americans are no longer the simple folks in *Our Town* who knew who they were and what was expected of them. We come in many colors, with differing backgrounds and traditions. We recognize that we have some things in common, but we are increasingly aware that we do not see everything the same way, which raises the question of whether we can agree to a common set of standards.

Taking a strong position on one side is Diane Ravitch (p. 8), who warns against extreme ethnocentrism. She offers an eloquent portrait of the American common culture, arguing that it is "an amalgam of all the different groups that have joined American society and enriched our shared culture." Because she believes all children are entitled to participate in that shared culture, she urges the public schools to "remain true to their historic role" of "teaching children an awareness of their American identity."

Taking the opposite view is Asa Hilliard, a champion of differentiation. He argues that the approach he calls multicultural (the term is used differently by different writers), is a response to "centuries of falsehood and defamation" and that its primary

goal is "to present a truthful and meaningful rendition of the whole human experience." He contends that pluralism in society and in school curriculums is natural and desirable. What is unnatural, he claims, is making "a political decision to coerce a choice of culture."

James Banks (p. 32), widely respected as a thoughtful interpreter of the meaning and practice of multicultural education, takes a moderate view. Deploring the harshness of recent debates in the mass media between multiculturalists and defenders of the Western tradition, he calls for respectful discussions among "leaders and educators of good will" aimed at formulating workable solutions.

I agree with Banks that, though the issue is important, the tone of the dispute has in some cases been unduly vicious. The fact is that schools need to attend to three levels of culture: they need to honor the cultures of students themselves, while bridging to the culture of the broader society. And in the modern world they must help students become acquainted with numerous other cultures, within their own nation and in other nations around the globe.

An educator especially well qualified to help us understand the relationships among these aims is Foxfire's Eliot Wigginton (p. 60), who for 25 years has quietly helped students acquire the skills of the broader society through study of their own heritage and cultural traditions. Arguing on the basis of his extensive experience that celebrating their own culture does not make students ethnocentric, Wigginton describes the kind of democratic classroom in which many of the arguments over whose culture to teach become "pointless background noise." His testimony is consistent with the advice of Sara Bullard (p. 4) that the way to begin is to "create a small caring community in the classroom." □

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