

Why 'Remedial' History?

WALTER PARKER

The social science faculty of a community college recently sponsored a symposium to consider its foremost problem: ignorant high school graduates requiring beginning instruction in history, geography, and government. The faculty invited area high school teachers and teacher educators to discuss several difficult questions: Why is the American high school curriculum so incredibly easy? Why is student effort strictly voluntary? Why are two-thirds of our high school graduates permitted not to take a world history course? Why is attendance the only real requirement for a diploma; that is, why is no demonstration of knowledge required? Why are diplomas simply given away?

No one knew the answers. The questions came fast, and they were daunting. Everyone present was disgusted with the answer of the early 1980s — "minimum competency" tests for graduation — because they set such low standards for schoolwork, requiring proof only that students could balance checkbooks, name their two senators, and complete job application forms. With the help of historians and behavioral scientists present, the discussion turned to a free-wheeling analysis of these problems and some brainstorming on remedies.

The Comprehensive Curriculum Myth

An entrenched belief system in the

United States suggests that nations such as Japan and Germany track students, forcing career choices early in life, while we provide a comprehensive curriculum for all students. This is patently false — a full-blown illusion. On the average, only 75 percent of this nation's children graduate from high school. But that's not the point. The point is that when in school, the graduates-to-be (like the dropouts, before they leave) are exposed not to one curriculum, but to two. One curriculum is composed of high-status knowledge and one of low-status knowledge. Few children are exposed to the former. Most students — the great mass known today as "mid kids" — get the latter. The two tracks have distinct vocabularies, rituals, and academic expectations. Indeed, they are not different versions of the same curriculum, but different curriculums altogether.

The differentiated curriculum in American schools, when acknowledged, often is explained away with psychological terms such as *ability* and *aptitude*. By contrast, Japanese schools explain school achievement in moral-volitional terms — virtues really — such as effort and persistence.

Feasible Remedies

What interventions — not utopian but feasible — could make a difference? The group nominated five:

1. *A school system should do whatever is necessary to fully implement proven programs that support student success.* This solution would include full funding of Head Start, school libraries, and curriculum materials centers, including up-to-date textbooks in the hands of each student. Less obviously, as Brown

details in *Schools of Thought*,¹ this remedy calls for improved working conditions for the adults in the system.

2. *A school system should increase the amount of time students spend studying the most important topics.* American high school students are engaged in academic study just one-third to one-half the amount of time as their counterparts abroad. This is primarily because we have a short school day, week, and year, and also because, especially in high schools, we give an inordinate amount of time over to athletics during the school day.

3. *A school system should always identify a short list of the core topics as the centerpiece of its curriculum in each field.* Democracy and Its Alternatives, Pluralism and Migration, the Interna-

The Dual Track System

High Track

Vocabularies
AP History
discussion
critical thinking

Rituals
AP examinations
humanities block

Expectations
composing essays
developing arguments
high-status college entrance

Low Track

regular or dummy history
recitation and debate
list the causes

regular or dummy history
athletic competition

filling out forms
remembering things
low-status college entrance

tional System and the Development Crisis, Human-Environment Interaction, and Recurring Public Controversies (e.g. Who is responsible for the poor?) were nominated by this group as core topics for the social studies curriculum.²

4. *A school system should provide time for teachers and administrators to conduct in-depth study on core topics.* In-depth study is a relatively new pedagogy, and most of us working in schools today have not been apprenticed to it. We should not assume we know how to do it.

5. *A school system should halt its indiscriminate distribution of*

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diplomas. This solution might require differentiated graduation certificates. One certificate might indicate only that the student has gone through the paces earning at least a 'D' in required coursework. Another, a "Certificate of Learning," would indicate that the student had submitted an exhibition¹ of his or her understandings and competencies related to core topics.

This group of local educators was roundly disappointed at the sad state of high school graduates' knowledge. Participants wanted most to see action on the first and fifth remedies. The group felt it was up to legislators and school board members to move ahead on the first remedy, and that the fifth remedy should fall to a planning group composed of local community college, high school, and teacher education faculty.

Is there a trend away from the diploma-mill high school? With national groups developing national standards and local groups, such as this one, arising spontaneously, the answer is "maybe."

¹R. G. Brown, (1991), *Schools of Thought*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

²A few short lists are receiving wide attention today: See mine in *Renewing the Social Studies Curriculum*, (1991), ASCD, and several in *Historical Literacy*, (1989), P. Gagnon, ed., (New York: Macmillan)

Examples for social studies exhibition are available: D. P. Wolf, (n.d.), *Assessment as an Episode of Learning*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Graduate School of Education). F. M. Newmann, (October 1990), "A Test of Higher-Order Thinking in Social Studies," *Social Education*, 54: 41-56. W. C. Parker, (November 1990), "Assessing Citizenship," *Educational Leadership* 48 (3), 17-22. T. Sizer (1992), *Horace's School*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

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