

What Makes a Good High School Curriculum?

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In my community, I often meet my neighbors when I walk my dog Turk, or when I go to parties or to meetings about the schools. When they see me, I think that a little bell of recognition sometimes rings in their heads. The bell reminds them that I'm a university professor related in some mysterious way to high school education.

So they tell me what makes a good high school curriculum. They seldom ask me; they usually tell me. Almost always, they have their own sons and daughters in mind as they tell me what high schools should teach. That's natural. I want the best possible education for my children; I am glad that they too want the best possible education for their children.

A neighbor who works for Bell Telephone Laboratories says, "There has been a tremendous explosion of knowledge in the past few years. Do you realize that 87 percent of all of the scientists who ever lived are alive at this very moment? Knowledge is multiplying fantastically. I want my son to master concepts and relationships and to have the skills to acquire and use the new knowledge, especially in the sciences and modern mathematics."

Another neighbor, who is a member of the local League of Women Voters, says, "I listen to my daughter's friends when they're sitting around our house. They want to make a difference in this world but they have no idea of how to go about it. High schools ought to teach them how to participate in community life as young citizens and how to deal with social forces and problems."

Another of my neighbors has a deserved reputation as a good mother. She says, "I want my children to be good human beings. For instance, I hope they will hear and play music, read widely and love knowledge, be creative in the arts, take part eagerly in sports, and enjoy their leisure. The need is for well-balanced people who hold to humane values, I hope the high schools help the young to solve their problems and to live with themselves."

Another neighbor owns a garage. He says, "Not everybody goes to college for further education and for preparation for a professional career. High schools ought to teach practical skills too so that a youngster can move into a job after he gets his high school diploma. Girls ought to know more than they do about making a good home; they get married young these days and homemaking and child raising soon become their jobs. Now the courses my son and daughter are taking"

My neighbors and your neighbors have a variety of ideas on what their children should be taught in high schools. And no wonder. A variety of young people from a wide diversity of family and economic backgrounds go to high schools today.

It wasn't always so, as two members of my family can testify. Just before 1900, when my mother was a teenager, less than one out of ten young people from fourteen to seventeen years of age were in school. But in 1960, when one of my sons was a high school sophomore, almost nine out of ten young people from fourteen to seventeen were in school. In these United States we are well on our way to providing a high school education for all of the youngsters of all of the people.

What a range of young people attend our public high schools in America! Here's Susan: brilliant, already accepted by one of the "Seven Sisters" colleges, studying PSSC physics devised by the best brains of M.I.T. and elsewhere, speaking French fluently, reading William Faulkner and Jean Paul Sartre, wrestling with calculus, learning international economics, planning to travel on the Continent with her family next summer. Here's Mike: indifferent, ready to quit high school, attending remedial reading class, seeing some sense in the industrial arts program he calls "shop" but repelled by geometry and world history, counting the days 'til he's sixteen and free to make the wrong decision.

Here's Jane: of average ability, reading *Silas Marner* at school and movie fan magazines at home, doing well in the health unit in biology but poorly in civics, finding mathematics only tolerable, coming fully alive only in home economics and band, confiding in her counselor that there's only one degree she wants: the MRS.

Here's Joe: alienated from both school and society, hating every moment spent in every subject, proud of being chosen War Lord by his gang, itching for the next rumble or, better still, for some student or teacher to knock off the invisible chip he wears to school, when he comes to school at all.

Here's Maria: physically deprived of good nutrition, adequate housing and clothing; culturally deprived of books, magazines, newspapers except for gutter journalism, without games, travel, dinner table conversation, privacy, and desperately trying to master ways of living and learning she has never known which are taught to her in a strange foreign tongue.

Here's Harry: creative and individualistic, understanding what the poetess, Edna St. Vincent Millay, meant by saying "Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare" now that he has fallen madly in love with mathematical analysis. He pays no attention whatsoever to his other subjects.

Add to Susan, Mike, Jane, Joe, Maria and just about 15 million other young people who attend all types of secondary schools today. Include those wondrously individual youngsters whom you know best from your own family and immediate neighborhood.

The instructional program cannot be the same for all of them; no single curriculum for the high school can serve all of them well. So a good high school curriculum recognizes the existence of individual differences and provides as best it can a variety of content, methods, resources and programs.

My neighbors and your neighbors might agree that a good high school curriculum should take individual differences into account, particularly in our democracy which is committed to the worth and dignity of the individual. But my friend from Bell Telephone Laboratories will still say that all of these individuals must grapple with the knowledge explosion, particularly in the sciences and mathematics. My neighbor from the League of Women Voters will continue to stress that each individual must face social problems and learn the ways of responsible citizenship. My neighbor who is a good mother will continue to promote the development of humanely oriented individuals. My friend who owns a garage will continue to emphasize vocational training and homemaking. Differing program and instruction to adapt to the wide range of young people? Yes, they may say, but the priority should be given to my emphasis because mine is the one really important purpose. So say my neighbors and possibly your neighbors.

I suspect that my neighbors and your neighbors will be arguing about purposes and priorities for a very long time. The more they argue the more I am reminded of the old East Indian legend of the blind man and the elephant. Remember it? One blind man seized the tail and pronounced the elephant a rope, another grasped the trunk and decided he held a snake, a third patted the elephant's side and concluded the animal was a wall. In a way, each of them was right. Yet they were wrong because their interpretations were incomplete rather than whole. The beast was really an elephant.

The curricular animal is also made up of parts which, when well coordinated, make a whole. Certainly we maintain high schools so that young people may learn to use man's increasing knowledge as they grow more adept with principles and relationships and skills. Certainly we have developed high schools so that the young will become citizens who are equipped to deal with urgent forces and trends. Certainly a practical vocational reason led our complex, industrial civilization to extend high school education to young people who could no longer completely learn their future work at home as they had in bygone farming days. Certainly we maintain high school so that young people may learn to live well as balanced human beings guided by humane values.

A mark of a good high school curriculum is maintaining balance among the important priorities and purposes. But I am sure this won't satisfy my neighbors or your neighbors, each of whom seems to want full speed ahead for his chosen viewpoint and damn the torpedoes.

Only his family and his dog love a curriculum worker, whether a superintendent or a principal or a supervisor or a professor of education. Even when he is on your side in the continuing great debate on education, he isn't on your side as strongly as you think he should be. This is because he believes that balance contributes to making a good high school curriculum. Balance is an undramatic idea about which no one can get excited.

But people do get excited about the subjects, courses and problems they regard as requirements.

If we put all of my neighbors and all of your neighbors together, they would recommend, at the very least, that the high school teach (take a long breath) geography, economics, sociology, civics, anthropology, American History, European History, area studies (for instance, the Far East), problems of democracy. And general science, earth science, psychology, biology, chemistry, physics. And general mathematics, algebra, geometry, advanced algebra, trigonometry, calculus. And reading, spelling, composition, listening, speech, dramatics, linguistics, American literature, European literature, world literature. And industrial arts, fine arts, typing, music (both vocal and instrumental), home economics, business education, physical fitness, intramural activities, varsity sports. And Spanish, French, Latin, Russian, German. And the varieties of vocational education. And international education, family living, consumer education, the local community, driver education, conservation of resources, intercultural education, competing ideologies, health, safety, sex education, population problems, orientation to school, alcohol education, labor-management relations, the great technology, career planning, propaganda and public opinion, self-understanding, leisure and recreation. And co-curricular activities such as clubs, councils, organizations.

All this in an 8:30 AM to 3:30 p.m. school day, five days a week, nine months a year during the regular high school years? In sober actuality, a twelve-hour day, a seven-day week and a twelve-month year which monopolized several times the normal high school span of years would not suffice, so gargantuan is the assignment our neighbors make. Since America doesn't want octogenarians still attending high school, high schools are forced to select. Decisions must be made as to what is education for all, the "common fund of knowledge, values and skills, vital to the welfare of the individual and the nation." Decisions must be made as to what is education for some, the "opportunities for developing the individual potentialities represented in the wide range of differences among people."

Who makes these decisions? In the United States we do not have a national ministry of education which prescribes the national curriculum. In our country, local school boards are the legal instruments through which the states fulfill their responsibilities for education. These boards set policies and employ the staff.

In the United States our state school systems by the 1960s usually required of ninth to twelfth grade students three or four years of English~ one to three years of social studies, including American History and citizenship, one to two years of science, one to two years of mathematics, and anywhere from half a year to four years of physical education and/or health. Beyond the requirements by the state, local school boards can and do set their own requirements for general education for all. Local school boards also decide which electives are to be offered as specialized education for some. Naturally, the local boards are affected by custom, federal legislation and assistance, college requirements, national surveys, widely read writers, local opinion, and especially, leadership by the professional staff.

So what helps to make a good high school curriculum? Good decisions, within sensible state limitations, by citizens of communities as to goals, by local school boards as to policies and by professional staff members as to how to put goals and policies into practice. Good decisions as to general education to be required of all young people in the student body. Good decisions as to possible specialized education to be taken by some, but not all, young people in that particular community and in that particular student body. Recognition that, in a changing world, change is inescapable. Willingness to experiment and readiness to evaluate.

The effort to decide what courses all in a school should take and what some should take is important. But still more important is looking beyond the course labels to the learning experiences of the individual student. In education, teaching does not guarantee learning. Teaching can only provide opportunities for learning. Sometimes the learning opportunities are poor, sometimes they are rich.

For instance, one evening my older son, then a high school student, was presumably studying his biology. But he was also watching a stirring drama on TV. I protested, "Jon, I don't believe you can study and watch TV at the same time."

"I really can, Dad," he said. "After all, I'm just memorizing the names of some bones. They sound like that spiritual about the ankle bones connecting with the leg bones, etc. A very dull assignment and I'll forget it right after the exam. But it's required. So I'll memorize the bones while I'm getting some good out of this show."

He did too, as the results of the examination demonstrated. But a few weeks later he tackled a genuine problem in biology. No TV. In the quiet of his room he studied for many nights on the problem of relationships between heredity and race. He read a variety of books. as he studied the insights of sociologists and anthropologists, as well as of biologists. He completely committed himself to inquiry and discovery.

The label of the course was high school biology. But when we look behind the label, we see that the great difference was in the learning experiences. To Jon, the bone memorization was trivial, meaningless, dull, while the problem of heredity's relation to race was important, full of meaning, vital. Possibly, you may not agree with his perception. But the stubborn fact remains that this was how he saw it. So, for him, one experience was educative and the other wasn't.

What do you remember most vividly from your own high school studies? I'll gamble that your memories include learning experiences that had genuine meaning to you, perhaps the time you discovered Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, perhaps the week the people of the French Revolution became real, perhaps the special report on weather you made before the science class.

So another thing that makes a good high school curriculum is the significance of the learning experiences. After all, the curriculum is made up of all of the learning

experiences which are under the control of the school. Do these learning experiences help young people to grow, make them want to learn more, open the gates, to new horizons? Do they make the students think, supply them with problems with which to wrestle, give them the opportunity to inquire and find out?

Only good teachers who have mastered their subject matter and who have learned the magic craft of fostering growth and thought can develop vital learning experiences. If one answer exists to our question "What makes a good high school curriculum?," that answer is "Good teachers."

That's why every once in a while when we come back from a walk or when I have returned from a party or a meeting, my dog, Turk, notices me looking worried. I have met one of my neighbors who is enthusiastic about some aspect of the whole curriculum but who can't bring himself or herself to feel that our teachers should be adequately paid.

When I tell this to my dog Turk, he thumps his tail sympathetically. Unfortunately, Turk has no say. But my neighbors and your neighbors do have a say in the American educational system. They can speak up in their own communities for the making of a good high school curriculum: recognition of individual differences, a balance among purposes, wisely selected general and specialized education, significant learning experiences and, above all, those good teachers.

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