On the High School Curriculum: A Conversation with Ernest Boyer

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Your book High School was published five years ago, shortly after A Nation at Risk. How has the school curriculum changed in that time, and how have the issues changed?

Curriculum has not been at the heart of this movement. Cued by A Nation At Risk--and to some extent recently reinforced by William Bennett's James Madison High School--most improvement efforts have involved taking traditional labels and simply adding on: more history, more science, more English. I'm not against that since in the end we can't avoid converting our curriculum into currency for transcripts and the like, but we've not seen much discussion of how the various disciplines could be seen as serving some larger integrative ends. So we aren't helping students understand how their courses relate to the world in which they live or to the larger interdependent world which they will inevitably confront.

You're saying, then, that the fundamental issues remain the same?

Yes, core curriculum, for example. I get nervous when I hear that term, even though I use it myself, because it immediately conjures up an image of units and labels. Now, of course, students need to develop some common understandings and some common knowledge in order to read the morning paper and converse about important issues; but I'm much more concerned that they develop an understanding of human commonalities, which could be arrived at through a variety of ways in the curriculum and a variety of experiences. We have not had, during the past five years, creative inquiry as to how we might organize the fields of knowledge to help enlighten students to prepare them for the world they will inherit.

In what high school subjects is there the most need for thorough curriculum revision, in your opinion?

Two areas quickly come to mind. I continue to be bewildered by the teaching of science; I really wonder why we can't relate scientific discoveries to the generalist in a useful way, rather than offering material intended for future scientists and engineers, which only a handful of our students are.

We are living in a time in which how we handle our technologies may determine whether we survive. I say we need more creative work in how to relate science and technology to ordinary students, who may not be going on to school at all.

Asking them to take an isolated course in biology or chemistry does not fit the bill.

You said there was another area that concerns you.

Well, I think social studies couldn't be more confused. We've completely lost our way as to priorities among the traditional fields of history, civics, geography, economics, and the like. We need fresh, integrative thinking there. That's why I look with sadness on what happened to that really creative work, Man, A Course of Study, which came out of the Sputnik era. It wasn't necessarily the best, but it was on the right track--an imaginative attempt to approach social studies in a powerful cross-cultural way.

Students need to see other cultures in the context of the changing nature of our interdependent world. I worry about Secretary Bennett's scornful treatment of other cultures, not only because it's arrogant, but because our very survival depends on how we deal with the rest of the world. We study Western civilization to understand our heritage, our roots, our past; but we need to study non-Western cultures to understand our future.

You write and speak eloquently about the value of history and literature, as do Lynne Cheney, Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, and William Bennett. They insist that a chronological approach is essential if students are to develop a sense of history, but you differ by saying these courses need not be

taught chronologically. What makes you think these subjects can be taught successfully in other ways?

I don't think the issue is chronology. The issue is to remind ourselves that one of the elements of being human is that we are products of the past and shapers of the future. In order to understand that, we must gain the perspective of time. My suggestion is <u>not</u> to start with the past but to start with the present and take leaps back. I'd like to teach history, for example, by having students in a shop start with the internal combustion engine and go back to investigate how we got this thing. Or you could start with the current debate about nuclear energy. Unfortunately, we usually start with something that's like a fairy tale and work our way forward. I think that's all wrong.

You don't agree with those who would eliminate ''social studies'' and just teach history, geography, and so on?

No, no, no! The term <u>social studies</u> has been used as a whipping boy, but what the critics forget is that the nation's most distinguished historians--Charles Beard, _____, and others **[Dr. Boyer: Can you give one other name?]**--chose that title in a study of the schools in the mid-1920s.

There's a related question. Conspicuously absent from most current statements about social studies is any attention to students' own personal and social development. I don't recall

any references to that in your book High School, other than your recommendation for a new Carnegie unit. You didn't call for instruction in child development or family living, for example. Does that mean you're skeptical about teaching those kinds of things?

I'll give two answers. First, if I were to rewrite my book, I'd put more emphasis on the physical and social dimensions of students' education. My only justification for perhaps undervaluing that was my feeling that we urgently needed a way to inform students about what I call the ''commonalities'' of human experience.

But, second, I would say yes, I remain skeptical about the degree to which a class or other formal educational experience can affect students' attitudes or cause them to live differently. I know it's important, but I've seen few examples of courses on sexual behavior and so on that gave me any confidence they would be successful in rearranging students' value systems. I am skeptical, yes, and worrisomely so.

But there is growing support for sex and drug education programs.

Society, while it criticizes the schools, expects us to be Mr. Fixit for the nation. All I'm saying is that when we take on such assignments and there's still drug abuse, we end up failures once again. I have to tell you: I don't think we

can solve the nation's drug problems, I don't think we can solve all the sex problems. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try; and I repeat that if I were to rewrite my book, I would expand on this, but--given the context in which the schools must work--I'm afraid we can only play at the margins.

One of the unusual recommendations in <u>High School</u>, as I mentioned earlier, was your call for a new Carnegie unit: a requirement that all students engage in community service.

Yes. We introduced the service idea to make the point that there is a problem among young people--not of their making--that may have much more to do with the school problem than does the question of units; it has to do with a sense of isolation and drift and anonymity. A high school principal who was a member of our commission told us horror stories about calls he gets, problems he works with. Nobody wants these kids. So we suggested service to make a point--and to stress the irrelevance of school activities to these kids' lives.

I wouldn't want to live or die by the service idea, but I do want to say if we ignore student alienation in our reform efforts, we are kidding ourselves. There are a variety of ways to make a school a more humane place, to make students feel they belong, to overcome the sense of anonymity--but of course schools can't do it alone. Unless society is a little friendlier to its children, we're in trouble.

You've said you felt a sense of urgency about improving the curriculum? What efforts impress you as moving in the right direction?

I'll mention two. I've seen several examples of locally designed curriculums involving integration of two or more fields of knowledge to help students understand what I refer to as ''the connectedness of things'': to show relationships between the subject areas and contemporary problems or to reveal how past events relate to the future. These attempts to use the subject areas thematically help students gain perspective.

Another direction I like is the creation of specialty schools. I like the idea of having schools for the arts, schools in certain career-related fields, but only if they use that specialty to educate students broadly. The ideal, for some students at least, is to start with their special interest and then work in English, history, or foreign language in relation to that special field of study. What I do worry about, frankly, are specialty schools that narrow the students and don't attempt to show how specializing can lead to breadth as well as depth.

You have a strong commitment to general education. In fact, it was something of a shock to find that both you and John Goodlad believe that a substantial portion of a student's curriculum should be required. I had felt for years that schools needed to restrict requirements to allow as much

individual choice as possible. That's because when a person has chosen to do something, he or she does it with more energy and commitment.

I'm torn in the same way. You can't deny that labeling anything ''required'' tends to dampen enthusiasm for it, especially among adolescents struggling for independence. On the other hand, I feel strongly that there are certain skills and bodies of knowledge that are worth developing and knowing and that an education's not simply an exercise in choice alone.

Language is a good example: students simply must become proficient in reading and writing the English language. We can't just say, ''Well, if this doesn't seem of interest to you, we won't bother with it.'' There's no way to be a participant in society, even passively, without sufficient common knowledge, both for functional literacy and for what E. D. Hirsch calls ''cultural literacy.''

It's possible, though, that if we took a look at what's taught in high school classes, it wouldn't be a very good match for the cultural literacy most adults need on a day-to-day basis.

Oh, I don't pretend that today's curriculum comes close to what I'm arguing for. One of the great disappointments of this movement has been that we are borrowing sentiments from the past. Secretary Bennett gives us a list of books--of course one can cite classic literature that has relevance

today--but to continuously dredge up books and ideas from the past that look pleasant from a conservative view but have no relevance is, I think, mischievous.

When I talk about the need for common literacy, common experiences in terms of both ideas and events, I'm not referring to a list of books. That's why, even though I support some of Hirsch's basic arguments, I think his list really threw us a curve. He explains--and he is a wonderfully decent man--that if he believed what he was saying, he needed to give it a try. But he went too far. He should have cited a few illustrations to make his points. When you list thousands of items, some of them pretty exotic, it gives aid and comfort to people who want to criticize.

Your thesis is that we should require about two-thirds of the curriculum for all students. Do you really mean <u>all</u> students? We have some evidence that while the abstractness of the usual curriculum is anathema to some students, they'll respond to another kind of experience. In the right kind of alternative school these kids can succeed. Would you do away with alternative schools?

No, of course not. But an alternative school should not necessarily have a wholly different core curriculum. When I say that about two-thirds of the student's program should be required, I'm not imposing any single set of courses. I only ask that the school establish the notion of what it expects of all its graduates, in terms of both basic skills to be

performed and areas of general knowledge to be understood, in order to be able to negotiate one's life after graduation. There can be a number of ways, including electives, to get to any particular goal.

In recent years the most notable response to concerns about making the curriculum more coherent, more focused, has been action by legislatures and state boards of education to raise high school graduation requirements. That has upset educators, because they see it as interfering with local control.

You're right--in the past five years the main actors in the reform movement have been governors, corporate leaders, and legislators. From a legal point of view, you might say that's the way it should be. Schools are creatures of the public will, after all, so public officials can do with them anything they want. But the role of state legislators and state departments of education is to regulate--so what has occurred in the name of reform has been regulatory. Now, that's not necessarily bad. We've surveyed some 20,000 teachers, asking them about the reform movement, and in general the teachers say the added regulations are good. But I worry mightily because an agency that is primarily regulatory cannot anticipate the future or ask the transcendent questions that lead to added quality.

What we've seen so far has been mostly mechanistic and only modestly adequate for what I would call true reform. We

have not found the means for those who are able to deal with the historical, intellectual, and qualitative aspects of the situation to inquire into other answers or to extend current answers in a better direction. If that doesn't happen soon, the result will be only a modest fixing of the fairly conservative system designed for the present, not the future, and primarily for the winning students and not for the least advantaged. In other words, the reform will fail at the most crucial point. I think we're at the outer edge of this approach right now. We don't need more regulating; we've had enough, thank you.

There are indications that the flood of state mandates may be slowing down.

Yes, people are starting to ask more substantive questions: What should we be teaching? How can we attract and hold outstanding teachers? How do we evaluate results? Above all, how do we deal with common expectations for a diverse student body? These four questions will endure. The second or third wave of reform may get us into them.

I should perhaps add that, in acting as they have, the policymakers have been trying to do right. They did some crazy things, but those things weren't done out of anger or mischief; they were done because of the limits to what a regulatory body can do. If a better direction hasn't been offered, I don't blame them; I blame us. We haven't found a way to carry reform forward to a higher level.

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But if educators now have a chance to catch their breaths, what should we do?

I've listed the questions we need to address. Take testing! I'm probably concerned about evaluation more than anything else, because, in the end, what we test will probably determine what we teach. Certainly what we test is indirectly a statement of what we prize. If we focus on the trivial, testing will eventually suffocate the whole effort, and we will not have created better schools. It's easy to criticize testing; my best speeches are about why I don't like tests. But that's not going to be sufficient; we have to figure out better ways to assess.

Getting something better won't be easy.

I wish we could create a kind of Manhattan Project around either curriculum or assessment or both and bring together for several years some of our most capable practitioners: teachers, association people, university professors--with time to really think about what to do. In my fantasies I see the next President of the United States, in the State of the Union message, announcing that the nation's top priority is education. Just as Kennedy said, ''Ten years from now, we'll be on the moon,'' this President says, ''By the turn of the century, we're going to have the best schools ever devised.

We're going to create a Manhattan Project that will move education reform to another level--''

--Including extensive work on curriculum?

Yes, the heart of the effort would be a continuing creative look at curriculum in relation to the future and not to the past, with the possibility of several approaches. Then school districts could still pick and choose--I do not think there's a single way. But there'd be attention to structural models as well as to curriculum.

I don't mean we'd be starting from scratch. What is required is positive leadership. The reform movement has been seriously damaged by the failure of our national voices to inspire and lead. At no other moment in our history was this nation better poised to move ahead. Corporate leaders and governors and parents and educators were joined. It wasn't a debate; it was a consensus; it was a movement ready to be led. And instead of that, we've been given the most contentious and argumentative issues: prayer in school, cut the department, reduce Chapter I, vouchers, plus name-calling, as if educators were the problem when they're working their hearts out. To have squandered a potentially powerful movement was, I think, a national disgrace. I would like to see fresh air and high vision, not politicized and not ideologically loaded, with credibility, enthusiasm, belief, and hope, in which we could see educators as the solution and not as the problem.

In the meantime, though, local educators can take a hard look at their own school curriculums.

Sure. In the end, in this country--and I suppose other countries--education happens in a thousand different places every day. Change comes in local schools, when a principal arranges a better program or a teacher tries a new idea. We like to look for heroic solutions, but that's not the way the human race moves forward. We have an obligation to think things through as carefully as we can, to affirm our ideas with conviction, and to move forward.

My purpose is to help shape the debate and try to define priorities. Where that debate goes and how it's implemented depends on the quality of the encounter at the local school. That's where ultimately reform will happen, and that's where my confidence and hope are greatest. I am most discouraged when I'm talking to people who don't meet with students every day, but I'm most encouraged when I meet with teachers and students. They have a better fix on what's needed than do all the theorists and policymakers. If we could find ways to give teachers and other educators more time to examine these questions--maybe in the new Manhattan Project--I'd have absolute confidence in the integrity of their responses.

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