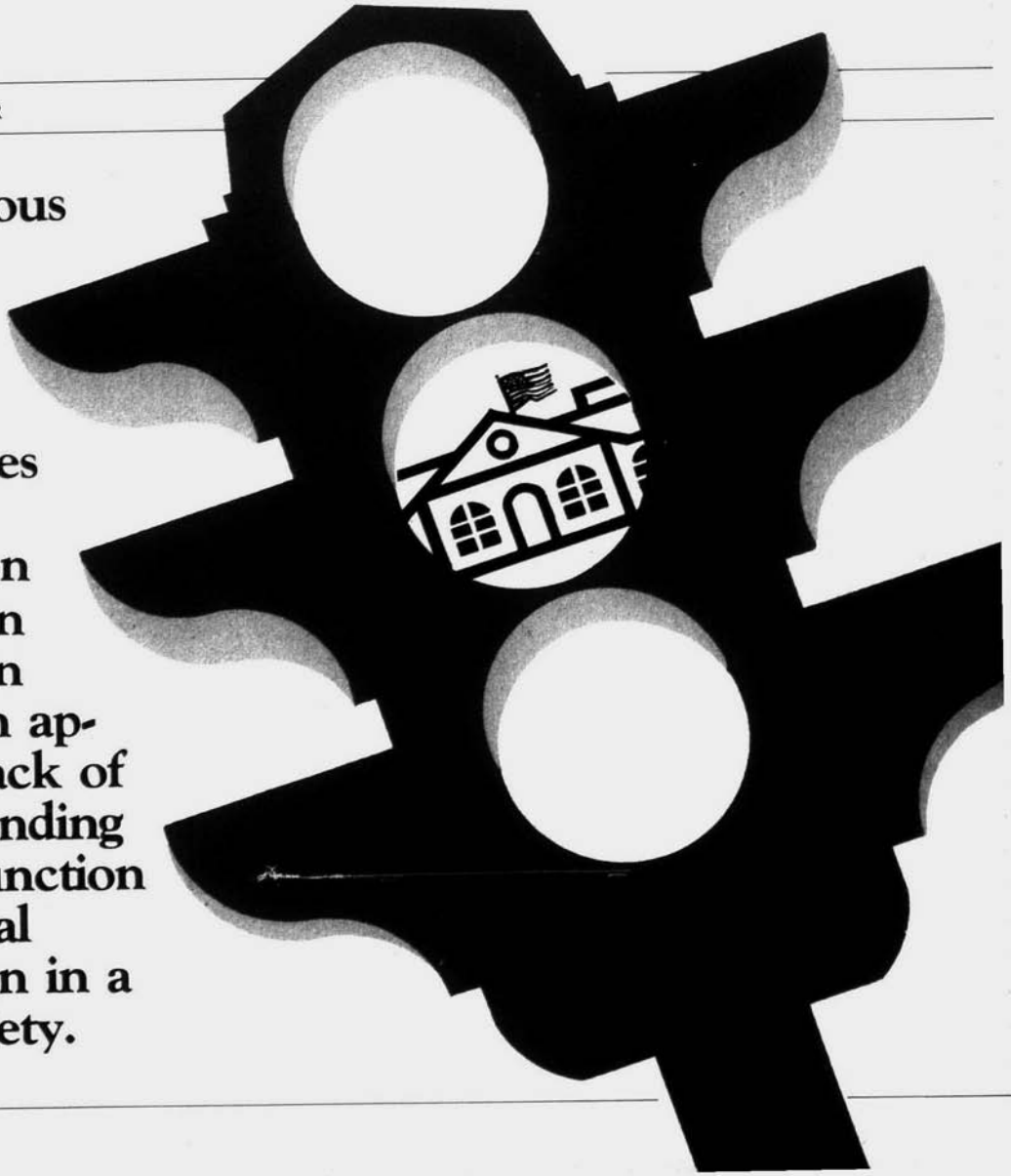
The American High School at the Crossroads

DANIEL TANNER

The various commissions, panels, and task forces issuing reports on American education reveal an appalling lack of understanding of the function of general education in a free society.



Leopards break into the temple, and drink the sacrificial chalices dry. This occurs repeatedly, again and again; finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and become a part of the ceremony. . .

—Franz Kafka

Since midcentury American public education has been buffeted incessantly by conflicting clamors for reform. Each clamor for reform is eventually met by a clamor for counterreform to undo the excesses of the previous one. The schools have become so inured to attacks from every conceivable and inconceivable source that they have come to regard these attacks as part of the ceremony.

Yet the schools have not been intransigent. Nor have they sought to marshall their defenses against destructive attacks while moving to benefit from constructive criticism. Instead, by and large, the ceremonial response of the schools has been to ride the dominant sociopolitical tide of the times. Witness how readily the schools shifted from the back-to-basics retrenchment of the early 1950s to discipline-centered curricula and the pursuit of academic excellence—with priority on the sciences and mathematics—during the late 50s and early 60s. From there, the schools responded to the call for "relevance" and "humanizing" the curriculum in the late 60s and early 70s, only to return to the basics in the late 70s and early 80s. And now, heading toward the mid-80s, they are once again seeking "academic excellence"—with priority on the sciences and mathematics.

Witness also the shift from emphasis on the gifted and talented during the era of the Cold War and space race, to the priority given the disadvantaged during the "war on poverty," and now back again to the gifted and talented. Innovations have been promoted and discarded segmentally like fads and fashions—instructional television, teaching machines and programmed instruction, team teaching and differentiated staffing, modular-flexible scheduling, independent study, mastery learning, and so on. Reforms ranging from the new mathematics to the open classroom have been painstakingly adopted and painlessly discarded.

No less than any other era, the contemporary scene is marked by waves of conflicting and contradictory criticism and reinvented demands for reform. Following an era of damaging retrenchment, public school educators may be justified in hesitating to find fault with any of the recent reports and studies of our schools when these documents call for a vast increase in our investment in education. But unless the profession sorts out the contradictory demands and prescriptions for reform, the schools will continue to be buffeted by conflicting demands and will ride whatever sociopolitical tide is dominant.

A Nation at Risk

In the current welter of reports and studies, the media have devoted the

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most attention to *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Education. As an official federal document, this report in particular was bound to attract attention; but it is the sensationalistic language of *A Nation at Risk* that garnered the widest media coverage and the most intensive discussion and debate. No report on education in recent memory has been so easily and readily identified and encapsulated in a single sentence: "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." The report alleges that the position of the United States in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by Japan and other competitors throughout the world as a result of "a rising tide of mediocrity in our schools that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."[1] In fixing the blame on our schools, the report goes on to state that "The citizen is dismayed at a steady 15-year decline in industrial productivity as one American industry after another falls to world competition."[2] The National Commission does not blame this decline on our existing political, industrial, and scientific leadership, or even on our institutions of higher education. Instead, it targets the public schools. However illogical, contradictory, or hypocritical this may seem, the public schools have always been the easy scapegoat. For those who see a positive side to such attacks, namely the prospect of a great infusion of federal and state funds for public education, it should be stressed that misguided attacks tend to lead to misguided and unbalanced "remedies."

Several aspects of *A Nation at Risk* are indeed puzzling. For instance, the Commission states that its first charge was to "assess the quality of teaching and learning in our Nation's public and private schools, colleges, and universities."[3] Yet the report proceeds to identify a host of deficiencies in our schools and prescribes a number of needed curricular reforms, but makes virtually no mention of any deficiencies in our colleges and universities, except for achievement test scores, and offers no curricular prescriptions for higher education, even though the 18-member Commission included three university presidents (one of whom chaired the Commission), a community college president, and two university professors (one of whom had served as a university president).

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Early in the report, under a section captioned "Indicators of Risk," is a list of 13 "documented indicators." Cited at the very top of the list is the allegedly poor performance of American students on the international comparisons of school achievement of a decade ago. Yet not until page 34 (of this 36-page report) is it acknowledged that this very same international study of educational achievement actually revealed that no nation approaches the United States in the proportion of youth completing high school and going on to higher education, and that, furthermore, the top 9 percent of American secondary students compared favorably in achievement with their peers in other nations.

Only a month prior to the release of *A Nation at Risk*, the director of the International Project for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, Torsten Husén, was impelled to write in an American education journal that the current waves of attack on schools in the United States resemble the criticisms following Sputnik I. He went on to reiterate the finding that the best American students are comparable in achievement to those of other advanced nations. Moreover, "The comprehensive systems, where the net is cast more widely, result in a bigger 'talent catch,' while those who are less able to get a better opportunity to develop their potential than in the selective systems of the traditional European type."[4] Husén concluded that the most serious problem on both sides of the Atlantic is the educational underclass of school failures. Unfortunately, neither *A Nation at Risk*, nor any of the other reports, provides any focus on this problem.

Most of the recent reports on educational reform point to the need for a common core of studies in our secondary schools. *A Nation at Risk* criticizes schools for the prevailing "curricular smorgasbord," and lists as its first recommendation that state and local high school graduation requirements consist of a core of four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and a half-year of computer science. Health and physical education and recreation go unmentioned, and the arts are relegated to ancillary status. Most unfortunately, instead of seeing the common core of studies as fulfilling the function of general education, *A Nation at Risk* labels the core as the "Five New Basics."

The issue is far more than a mere label. The conception of general education that emerged in American secondary and higher education in this century was directly linked with the ideals and functions of a democratic society. General education was conceived as that common universe of discourse, understanding, and competence necessary for effective membership in a free society.[5] In recent years, some of our leading colleges and universities have rediscovered the need for a coherent core of studies for general education. However, our secondary schools are being admonished to stress the "New Basics."

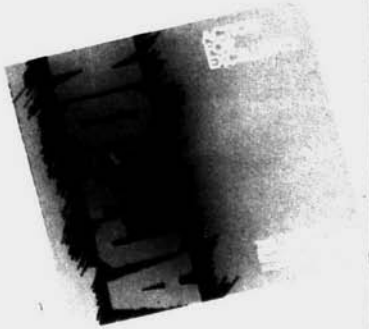
A Nation at Risk advocates administering national standardized tests to certify levels of achievement at various transition points in schooling; requiring far more homework for students; lengthening the school day and year; and instituting merit pay and the employment of teachers on an 11-month basis. The report also calls for making textbooks and other curricular materials

more rigorous in content, but makes no mention of the need to combat the censorship of school books and other curricular materials. The report gives lip service to our world as a "global village" and the democratizing function of our schools, but fails to broach the need for international understanding. Instead, the schools are regarded narrowly as instruments for regaining our dominance over world markets. No mention is made of the fact that the largest and fastest growing sector in the world economy is in military production and trade. No mention is made of the cost of this global military-industrial commerce to the health of our nation's economy and the corresponding neglect of our social well-being.

In short, this thin report of 36 pages, completed at a cost of almost half a million dollars over a period of almost two years, is a great disappointment. Chaired by the recently appointed President of the University of California and including in its membership such academic luminaries as A. Bartlett Giametti, President of Yale, and Glenn T. Seaborg, Nobel laureate and former President of the University of California, the report of the Commission on Excellence should have produced a paragon of excellence. Instead, the Commission resorted to superficial analysis, distortions of data, and reckless accusations.

Action for Excellence

Within weeks of the appearance of *A Nation at Risk*, the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, sponsored by the Education Commission of the States, issued its report, *Action for Excellence*. The membership of the Task Force included 13 governors, 14 chief executives of major corporations, six educators, four leaders of educational organizations, and one head of an industrial labor union. The tone and content of *Action for Excellence* are very similar to *A Nation at Risk*. Such words and phrases as "emergency," "urgency," "crucial to our national survival," "mobilizing," and "global competition" ring through the opening pages of *Action for Excellence*. "Japan, West Germany and other relatively new industrial powers have challenged America's position on the leading edge of change and technical invention," it declares.[6] In a text of only 42 pages, the Task Force offers the



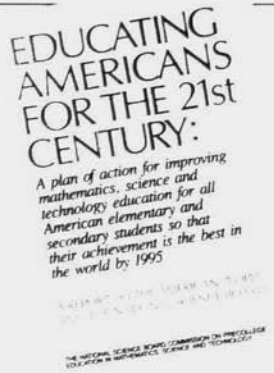
"Other recommendations of the Task Force include raising teacher salaries and instituting merit pay, increasing federal aid to education, and establishing partnerships between businesses and schools."

needed prescription for regaining our preeminent position in global industrial competition. Echoing the National Commission on Excellence, it calls for broadening the definition of basic skills and emphasizing "mastery of higher order skills" to meet the demand for "highly skilled human capital" in the "new era" of "global competition."

Many educators may take heart from the recognition, however belated, that the era of reducing the curriculum to minimum competencies and lowest common-denominator skills through back-to-basics has led to a decline in thinking abilities, and that a new era of curriculum reconstruction has arrived. However, the Task Force reveals no conception of general education to meet the needs of youth in a free society. The broadened basic skills identified in *Action for Excellence* are geared to industrial-business productivity. Appearing in the Appendix of the report is a list of "basic skills and competencies for productive employment" as developed by the business-industrial membership of the Task Force. In addition to basic skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, and science, the Task Force identifies competencies in reasoning, economics, computer literacy, and basic employment. "Good" citizenship is listed under "basic employment." The Task Force does not mention *democratic* citizenship and what this entails in terms of critically examining the pervading problems and issues of our times in the perspective of our historic experience. The arts, health, physical education, and recreation are conspicuously absent. More time and intensive work are advocated in the academic subjects while "soft, nonessential" courses are to be eliminated.

Other recommendations of the Task Force include raising teacher salaries and instituting merit pay, improving teacher education, increasing federal aid to education to meet national priorities, monitoring pupil achievement and the attainment of specific skills through periodic testing, and establishing partnerships between businesses and schools. In connection with these "partnerships," the Task Force advocates that business and industrial leaders "share with school managers (sic) their expertise in planning, budgeting and management," establish "customized job-training efforts between businesses and schools," and conduct "courses actually taught in offices and factories." Existing federal-state supported programs of vocational education are ignored. No mention is made of the dismal failure of earlier programs for engaging business and industry in education and job training for our youth, such as through the job corps programs conducted by business and industry with federal funds.

Early in this century, John Dewey warned that an enlightened, democratic social order requires "a vocational education which does not subject youth to the demands and standards of the present system, but which utilizes its scientific and social factors to develop a courageous intelligence, and to make intelligence practical and executive."[7] To Dewey, a free society cannot use the public school simply to turn out more efficient workers adapted to the present economic regime, but must equip individuals to control their own economic careers and to develop their insight to help bring about a reorganization of industry consonant with a democratic society. In contrast, the Task Force seeks to mold the rising generation to fit the needs of the existing industrial machinery.



"In seeking to reestablish the priority of science and mathematics over other subjects, the NSB Commission ignores the need to build a coherent curriculum in general education."

Action for Excellence finds no fault with our industrial-business and political leadership for the decline in our nation's position of dominance over world industrial markets. Instead, the blame rests with our schools. The schools are to be renewed by our business-industrial leadership, who will show school managers the "effective management techniques." The report makes no reference to the responsibility of our business-industrial leadership for the shoddy products, false and misleading advertising, intellectually retarded television fare, irresponsible environmental pollution, appalling cost overruns through the military-industrial complex, or the failures of our political leadership at national, state, and local levels to meet their campaign promises. No mention is made of the reduction of federal support of school lunch and nutrition programs, nor of the effects of inadequate nutrition on learning.

Like the National Commission on Excellence, the authors of *Action for Excellence* fail to recognize the need for a coherent curriculum in general education—a curriculum so conceived that our rising generation can develop the social power and insight necessary for effective citizenry and good government in a free society.

School leaders may be reluctant to fault a report that calls for strong federal commitment to education backed by greatly increased financial support. Indeed the precedence for such a commitment is well-established at all levels of education—elementary, secondary, and higher. But if there is a lesson to be learned from the federally supported curricular reform programs of the Cold War era, it is that the wider public interest must not be sacrificed for narrow nationalistic interests. Judging from *Action for Excellence*, we have not learned this lesson.

Educating for the 21st Century

A more considered report, couched in somewhat less inflammatory language than either *A Nation at Risk* or *Action for Excellence*—yet one that is likely to raise at least as many problems and issues as it seeks to solve—is the report by the Commission on Precollege Education in Mathemetics, Science, and Technology. This Commission, appointed by the National Science Board of the National Science Foundation, issued its report in September 1983 under the title, *Educating Americans for the 21st Century: A Plan of Action for Improving Mathematics, Science, and Technology for All American Elementary and Secondary Students So That Their Achievement is the Best in the World by 1995*. The National Science Board (NSB) Commission, chaired by a former U.S. cabinet member, included five college administrators, five college professors, three industrialists, a former Air Force Chief of Staff, one state school administrator, two school administrators, one head of an educational organization, and one TV entertainer.

"The Nation that dramatically and boldly led the world into the age of technology is failing to provide its own children with the intellectual tools needed for the 21st century," begins the report, which goes on to warn that "Already the quality of our manufactured products, the viability of our trade, our leadership in research and development, and our standards of living are being challenged."[8] Toward the end are the following statements, reminiscent of the era of the Cold War and space race:

> Prepared citizens (especially in science, mathematics and technology as well as other basic academic and technical subjects) are required for the operation of the Nation's essential industries and services, the ability of those industries to compete internationally and for military security. . .
>
> Federal involvement is necessary when certain critical skills are extremely short or when there is a great need for an urgent program to produce vital talent (e.g., shortages of trained doctors or other medical personnel in wartime or the national response to Sputnik).[9]

Under the caption, "Lessons from Other Countries," the NSB Commission proceeds to point to the International Study of Mathematics Achievement of 20 years ago and the International Study of Science Achievement of 13 years ago as evidence of our failure. This alleged failure is documented with a reference to Torsten Husén, despite the fact that Husén warned against making the kind of misinterpretations of the findings made by the NSB. In appallingly unscientific fashion, the NSB compares the mass of American 18-year-olds with a small elite of other nations, ignoring Husen's clear and repeated warnings *against* comparing a small elite school population, such as in the European nations, with the large comprehensive, and cosmopolitan school population of the U.S. Only after upholding Japan as the appropriate standard does the NSB Commission acknowledge that Japan has a culturally homogeneous student population, and that Japanese high school students must survive an examination cauldron under a system of relatively limited opportunities for higher education and upward social mobility.

"We must return to basics, but the 'basics' of the 21st century are not only reading, writing, and arithmetic," declares the NSB Commission. "They

include communication and higher problem-solving skills, and scientific and technological literacy—the *thinking* tools that allow us to understand the technological world around us."[10] As in the case of other reports of national commissions on education, the schools are blamed for a decline in student thinking abilities. And although the National Assessment test scores are cited as evidence of this decline, the report fails to note the analysis made by the National Assessment staff attributing this decline to the back-to-basics retrenchment that was imposed on the schools during the 1970s.

In addition to raising the requirements in mathematics, science, and technology in K-8, the NSB Commission calls for minimum state-mandated requirements for high school graduation to include three years of mathematics including one year of algebra, and at least three years of science and technology, including one semester of computer science. Statewide performance standards should be instituted, and the federal government should develop and maintain a national mechanism to measure student achievement in order to make national, state, and local comparisons. College entrance requirements should include four years of high school science, including physics, chemistry, and one semester of computer science; and four years of mathematics, including a second year of algebra and course work in probability and statistics.

Although the NSB Commission rightly criticizes the existing segmented and fragmented science curriculum, and calls for curriculum articulation in science, it overlooks the need to address the social implicatons of science and technology through correlation of the sciences and the social studies for purposes of general education. In seeking to reestablish the priority of science and mathematics over other subjects in the curriculum, the NSB Commission ignores the need to build a coherent curriculum in general education. Moreover, the Commission fails to address the needed relationships between technology and vocational education. Vocational education is virtually dismissed as being concerned with narrow job-related skills.

Choosing to overlook the shortcomings and failures of the unprecedented national curriculum–reform projects during the Cold War era of the 50s and 60s, when the National Science Foundation expended hundreds of millions of dollars for the "new" mathematics and "new" science disciplines in our schools, the NSB Commission recommends that, "The National Science Foundation, which has recognized expertise in leading curriculum development, should again (sic) take the leadership in promoting curriculum evaluation and development for mathematics, science and technology." It also recommends spending several billion federal dollars for this effort over the next six years, as a necessary investment in "our Nation's human capital."

Finally, the NSB Commission calls on the President of the U.S. to immediately appoint a permanent National Education Council to report regularly to the President and to provide leadership in developing, coordinating, and implementing plans to improve and maintain the quality of the nation's elementary and secondary education in mathematics, science, and technology. The Council would establish national goals for education, ensure the necessary assessment of student achievement, and monitor and report annually on the progress being made.

The wider ranging implications of the report of the NSB Commission raise incalculable dangers of establishing the same mechanisms employed by the USSR in subordinating education to the interests of the state. In 1916 Dewey pointed to this danger in tracing the evolution of German nationalism, which turned the schools to serving the interests of the military and in struggles for international supremacy in commerce. As a consequence, the "state" was substituted for humanity and cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism.[11]

The Paideia Proposal

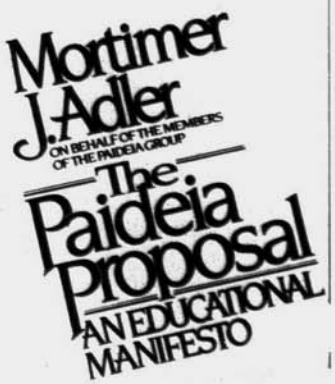
Mortimer Adler has long been an advocate and popularizer of the perennialist school of thought. In *The Paideia Proposal: A Curriculum Manifesto*,[12] Adler speaks for members of his "Paideia Group" in calling for a general, one-track curriculum for all throughout the 12 years of "basic schooling"—with no electives except for the choice of a second language.

His 22-member Paideia Group is dominated by fellow perennialists from the higher echelons of academe, including three Van Dorens from Adler's Institute for Philosophical Research, two leading members of the Council for Basic Education, and a former headmaster of Phillips Academy. However, considering that the membership also included the school superintendents of Chicago and Atlanta, a pubic high school principal, and the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, it is surprising that there are no dissenting opinions in the report.

Adler's one-track curriculum would consist of:

- The acquisition of organized knowledge by means of didactic instruction in language, literature, and fine arts; mathematics and natural science; and history, geography, and social studies
- Development of intellectual skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, calculating, and exercising critical judgment
- Enlarged understanding of ideas and values through Socratic questioning.

Adler's conception of mind as a muscle to be developed, or as a vessel to be filled, is expressed throughout. He sees



"Adler's conception of mind as a muscle to be developed, or as a vessel to be filled, is expressed throughout."

the mind being improved by the acquisition of information; drill and exercise (with the teacher functioning as an athletic coach); and, finally, "raising the mind up from a lesser or weaker understanding to a stronger and more fuller one" by Socratic questioning.

In various sections of the report, Adler misrepresents Dewey's views on vocational education. Dewey was unalterably opposed to vocational training as social predestination. But Dewey called for a kind of vocational education in the comprehensive secondary school that would enhance social sympathy and insight in a democracy, and lead to the improvement of social conditions.

Mortimer Adler's *Manifesto* should be read by educators as a curious artifact of perennialist/essentialist notions on the school curriculum and the nature of the learner.

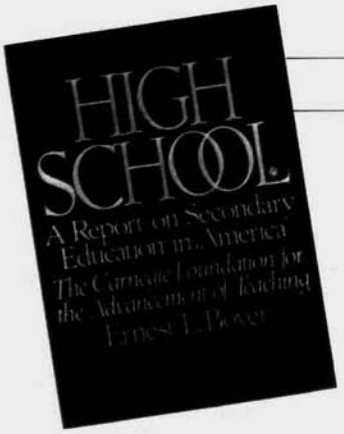
The Carnegie Foundation Report

If any of the current wave of reports on the state of American public education stand out in avoiding accusatory and condemnatory language, and in seeking constructive avenues for improvement, they are *High School* by Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and *A Place Called School* by John I. Goodlad, former Dean of Education at UCLA. Both of these reports involved actual study of conditions in selected schools throughout the nation, as well as the analysis of other data in formulating recommendations on needed reforms in educational policy and practice.

The Boyer report for the Carnegie Foundation is based on the observations of 25 educators who each spent 20 days visiting 15 public high schools representative of a "cross-section of American public secondary education."[13] A panel of 28 educators and lay citizens served in an advisory capacity. The aim was to identify, through the field visits, ways of improving secondary education. Selective literature and data on education from a variety of sources were also used.

The Boyer report identifies four essential goals and functions of the high school namely that it should help all students:

- Develop the capacity to think critically and communicate effectively through a mastery of language
- Learn about themselves, the human heritage, and the interdependent world in which they live through a core curriculum based on consequential human experiences common to all people
- Prepare for work and further education through a program of electives that develop individual aptitudes and interests
- Fulfill their social and civic obligations through school and community service.



"Boyer warns that the separate courses must be connected. . . . How this is to be done is left to the teachers and students to work out."

The Boyer report appropriately criticizes the many school-reform proposals for lacking a larger vision, such as represented by the above goals or functions of the high school. Although Boyer criticizes the use of the bookkeeping device known as the "Carnegie unit" in inventorying academic credits, he proposes a core of common learning listed by "academic units" that are virtually identical to Carnegie units. This core, totaling 14½ units, is to consist of the following: language, 5 units (Basic English: writing, 1 unit; literature, 1 unit; speech, ½ unit; foreign language, 2 units; arts, ½ unit); history, 2½ units (U.S. history, 1 unit; western civilization, 1 unit; non-western studies, ½ unit); civics, 1 unit; science, 2 units (physical and biological, 1 unit each); mathematics, 2 units; technology, ½ unit; health, ½ unit; seminar on work, ½ unit; and senior independent project, ½ unit.

Boyer warns that the separate courses must be connected to reveal how they relate to "our independent, interconnected, complex world." Unaccountably, he calls on the teachers of individual subjects to "bring a new interdisciplinary vision into the classroom" by making the necessary "connections between the disciplines." How this is to be done with a list of 17 different required courses is left to the teachers and students to work out. But it is the senior independent project of one-half credit (a written report focused on one contemporary issue) that will draw on the various academic subjects and connect them so as to reveal "the world as a complicated place," contends Boyer. That a single-semester course is too little and too late to accomplish such a function should be apparent from our experience with the old Problems of Democracy course. Moreover, all of our experience should have made it clear by now that faculty and students will not derive from a list of disjointed courses a coherent curriculum revealing the necessary interdependence of knowledge. Even the faculties and students at our leading colleges will not accomplish such a task unless it is built into the very structure and function of the total curriculum in general education. High school students need to be engaged in extended writing projects on pervading social issues through classes not only in English composition, but in literature, social studies, and history. The applications of mathematics and statistics in the sciences, social sciences, and vocational studies must be made continuously. Problems in public health need to be broached in biology (ecology) and the social studies. Boyer holds that "the study of health must become a priority in our schools." Yet his proposal calls for only one-half unit of health. No provision is made for physical education and recreation as part of the common core.

But the most baffling aspect of the common core in the Boyer proposal is the requirement of two years of a second language for all students in high school, built on an earlier study of a second language in elementary school. No mention is made of the great failure of the efforts to develop second-language fluency despite the expenditure of enormous federal funds under the National Defense Education Act, when foreign languages were offered almost universally in our elementary schools and elaborate electronic language laboratories were installed in our secondary schools. Language is a living process and the absence of opportunity to communicate

in a second language in daily life would leave us with little more than another empty curricular requirement. In fact, the Boyer proposal provides for a total core requirement of only 2½ units in English in high school. It would appear to be far more profitable to offer foreign languages as electives and to increase the core of English to four years, with a concerted emphasis on correlating and synthesizing the work in composition and literature with social studies and history.

Despite acknowledging the appalling problem of youth unemployment, the expressed interest of many of our youth in vocational education, and the recognition on the part of the general public of the need for career preparation in high school, Boyer dismisses vocational education in high school as inadequate or irrelevant. Using the same logic, Boyer would be hard pressed to justify most of the so-called academic subjects in the curriculum. Yet he employs such logic in denying the noncollege-bound students access to the federal-state supported programs in vocational education (unless they opt to enroll in a specialized vocational school). Instead, they would pursue "elective clusters" in career exploration or selected academic subjects during the last two years of high school. The result, according to Boyer, would be a single-track program for all students. He correctly calls for the elimination of the three-track system—academic, vocational, and general—as did Conant a quarter of a century ago. But unlike Conant, who advocated the availability of federal-state supported programs of vocational education within the structure of the comprehensive high school, Boyer confuses the enrollment in such programs with tracking. Tracking occurs when students in vocational and college preparatory programs are separated from one another not only in their respective programs, but also in their courses in general education and other studies. One unanticipated outcome of present-day arrangements whereby students attend an area vocational center on a shared-time basis is that, upon returning to their home school, they are tracked together in their academic and elective classes, and even in physical education.

Boyer also confuses classes in industrial arts and general automotive shop with vocational education. Such classes were never intended to meet a vocational education function. His proposal would lead to the further decline of the comprehensive high school as vocational education would be left to the segregated, specialized vocational school. In effect, the comprehensive high school would be reduced to a college preparatory/general academic school, and the makings of a dual system of education would be in place. In seeking ways to improve the quality of learning in our high schools, the Boyer report falls prey to the historic academic/vocational dualism whereby the quality of mind is the province of the academic side of the curriculum. The report fails to recognize the possibilities whereby the various sides of the curriculum can be mutually enriching, such as in the case of our great land-grant universities.

A Place Called School

A Place Called School by John Goodlad is derived from the findings of an eight-year project, "A Study of Schooling," which involved a sample of 38 schools, including 12 high schools, in 13 communities in seven sections of the nation.[14] A team of data collectors devoted almost a month in each community where systematic observations were made in over a thousand classrooms. Goodlad buttresses his own findings with an array of data from other studies as well as drawing upon source material from other professional literature. Although he claims that the schools in the study were selected for "diversity and representativeness," he states at the start that because schools vary so widely, no single set of recommendations are valid for all schools, though he sees the problems that emerge as being common to most. At the same time, he acknowledges that his agenda for improving the schools extend beyond many of the specific topics investigated, and that the reader bringing different values to any such agenda would be justified in reaching quite different recommendations.

Goodlad notes that only 75 percent of class time is devoted to instruction and that the overwhelming proportion of this time is in the mode of teacher "telling." Only rarely are students ob-

SOURCES OF THE VARIOUS REPORTS ON EDUCATION

Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do, by the College Entrance Examination Board, 1983, No Charge. The College Board, 888 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10106. Phone: 212/582-6210.

Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Our Nation's Schools, by the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983, $5.00. Education Commission of the States, Attention Terry Shinkle, Distribution Center, 1860 Lincoln, Suite 300, Denver, CO 80295. Phone: 303/830-3600.

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High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America, by Ernest L. Boyer, 1982, $15.00. Harper & Row, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022. Phone: 212/593-7000.

The Paideia Proposal, by Mortimer Adler, 1982, $2.95. Macmillan Publishing Company, 866 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022. Phone: 212/935-2000.

served making any decisions about their learning. He also find that tests and quizzes stress mainly the recall of specifics and narrow mechanical skills.

Goodlad observes that school administrators and teachers rarely exhibit concern for gathering and examining data relevant to the development of a balanced curriculum. He warns against state mandates of specific required courses and college entrance requirements being applied uniformly to all schools. Referring to the Harvard Report of 1946 (which likened the various branches of study to fingers emanating from a single hand), Goodlad proposes that student programs be drawn up as follows: 18 percent in literature and language (English and other); up to 18 percent in mathematics and science; up to 15 percent in each of the other major curricular fields (social studies; the arts, and the vocations); and the remaining 10 percent or more in free electives. He recommends that about two-thirds of studies would constitute a common core of concepts, principles, skills, and ways of knowing. (In contrast, the Harvard Report recommended that the core studies for general education comprise about half of the student's time in high school, and that approximately one-third of the time be allocated to vocational studies for those youngsters not going to college.)

Goodlad appropriately recognizes the vital need for general education in a free society, and he reveals an awareness of the rich literature on general education. Yet he does not adequately address the problem of how the "separate fingers" are to function as a "hand"—how the various branches of studies might be interrelated in a coherent way. At one point he describes one set of studies as cognitive (mathematics, physics, computer programming), another set as linguistic (foreign language, creative writing), and yet another as artistic. Isn't creative writing also artistic and cognitive? And isn't language a mode of thinking?

Goodlad found that where students are grouped by ability levels, the upper groups are accorded a relatively rich curricular experience, whereas the lower groups experience far more drill and rote learning. But he also found that heterogeneously grouped classes tended to resemble the high rather than the low ability-group classes in terms of the

A Place Called School

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

John I. Goodlad

"Goodlad recognizes the need for general education in a free society, and reveals an awareness of the rich literature on general education."

richness of studies and the more favorable classroom climate. The heterogeneous class would appear to present enormous positive implications for general education. In the high school, elective curricular options provide all kinds of mechanisms for self-selection groupings. The general education class is the one place where students of different backgrounds and destinies can address common concerns. The rich and vast literature on general education in the secondary school and college, stemming back to the 1930s and 40s, reveals that the function of general education requires concerted effort at developing curriculum correlation, fusion, and systhesis.[15] Goodlad gives insufficient attention to this need.

Like Boyer, Goodlad tends to look to the limitations of the vocational studies as they are presently provided for students who are not going on to college. In sections of his report, Goodlad appears to confuse the diffused shop classes with vocational programs. He advocates career exploration and guided work experience as part of the general education of all students. But for those not going on to college, any systematic program of vocational education would have to be found outside of high school. Hence, as in the Boyer report, the comprehensive high school would be virtually eliminated. In fact, the term *comprehensive high school* does not even appear in the index of Goodlad's report.

Goodlad appropriately criticizes the practices of tracking and ability grouping in the high school. But instead of showing how tracking can be eliminated in the comprehensive high school, he opts for the elimination of existing federal-state supported programs of vocational education.

In a final chapter, Goodlad calls for the total restructuring of our educational system. Instead of 12 years of schooling beginning at age six and ending at age 18, he advocates beginning at age four and ending at age 16. Goodlad contends that this would reduce the "extraordinary costs in developing curricula" and,

> The age of the undergraduate population would drop, as would the age of entering professional and graduate schools—at a time when the length of professional preparation continues to increase. The resulting early entry into occupations and professions would increase the average person's earning years and provide a longer period of payment into social security, helping to bail out this sinking benefit of retirement.[16]

Aside from the likelihood that there must be far better ways to bail out the social security system, Goodlad overlooks the extraordinary costs to the individual and society in providing productive employment for an army of 16-year olds. He also overlooks the fact that his proposal for reducing the age of college entrance by two years was tried during the early 50s under grants from the Ford Foundation. It was found that although the early-admissions population had significantly higher aptitudes and achievement records than the control groups, it also had a significantly higher rate of attrition and encountered more adjustment problems. Upon completion of college, the overwhelming majority of the successful early-admissions students expressed reservations about such acceleration. Moreover, the success of the program was open to serious question because the dropouts were not included in the comparisons, and the control population was not accorded the full scholarships and other amenities provided for the early-admissions group.[17]

Our existing structure of 12 years of schooling does not preclude acceleration for high-aptitude and high-achieving students. They can participate in advanced-placement programs, and they can carry additional courses in high school so as to graduate early. In some states they can leave high school early by passing a state test.[18] The fact that so few adolescents avail themselves of such vehicles for acceleration is testimony to the efficacy of the high school as it has evolved over many decades in a changing society.

The American High School: Its Responsibility and Opportunity

The current flurry of reports calling for the reform of American secondary education reflects many conflicting and contradictory prescriptions. Conspicuously absent from these documents is any consideration of our historic struggle to develop the unitary, cosmopolitan, comprehensive high school. This institution has given our nation the greatest educational yield in the world; at the same time, the attainment of our most intellectually talented youth is fully comparable to that of any other nation's school system. No concerted attention is given to the unfinished task of meeting the needs of youth for vocational education within the unitary structure of the comprehensive high school. Conspicuously absent from these documents is any concerted consideration of the lessons to be learned from the rich heritage of literature on the role, function, and structure of the comprehensive high school—such as the work of the American Youth Commission and the Educational Policies Commission, the Eight-Year Study, the Committee on the American High School of the John Dewey Society under the chairmanship of Hollis Caswell, and the work of James B. Conant on the comprehensive high school.

The negativism toward American public elementary and secondary education in the recent era of sociopolitical retrenchment contrasts sharply with the positive and optimistic attitude that prevailed at midcentury, an attitude that could impel Henry Steele Commager to make this assessment:

> No other people ever demanded so much of education as have the American. None other was ever served so well by its schools and educators. . . .
>
> Because we are a "new" nation we sometimes forget how very old are some of our avid practices. The U.S.—today the oldest republic—also has the oldest public school system in the world. . . .
>
> For a century and a half American schools have served and strengthened the commonwealth. They provided a citizenry as enlightened as any on earth. They justified and vindicated democracy's promise.[19]

A decade and a half later, amidst the rising national concern for the disadvantaged, Commager reiterated his faith in the power of education by declaring that "education is the beginning of social reform and regeneration."[20] Before the turn of the century, Dewey had written, "I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform."[21] Throughout the first half of this century the very idea of progress was intimately linked with progressive educational reform. The attitude was not one of naive optimism. Universal secondary education and open-access higher education became a reality. And this was accomplished against all odds with the most heterogeneous population of any modern nation. Had we adopted the divided school system of the Old World, higher education would have remained restricted to a privileged elite. The unique unitary structure of the cosmopolitan comprehensive high school kept the educational arteries open and gave the United States the highest educational yield of any nation without sacrificing the quality of achievement that accrues to those of highest ability.

Despite these accomplishments, the seventies were an era of retreat, as several "national commissions" called for the lowering of the school-leaving age to 14, shortening the school day and school year, and dismantling the comprehensive high school in favor of specialized high schools.[22] Nevertheless, the contagion of education had spread farther and penetrated deeper with each generation and, in the process, each generation of parents sought more and more formal education for their own children. No national commission could convince a generation of parents to lower their expectations for the education of their own children. Yet a price was paid as a result of efforts to undermine public confidence in public education, to reduce the curriculum to the "basics," to cut back on our investment in education, and to abandon our commitment to the unitary structure of the comprehensive high school.

In recognizing the failure of the past decade of educational and curricular retrenchment, we appear to be at a new crossroads. The road taken will be determined not by the fantasies of crystal-ball gazing and futurology, but rather by what we do here and now in attacking our most pervasive problems through means that are consonant with the democratic ideal of optimizing educational opportunity for all.□

[1]National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983), p. 5.

[2]Ibid., p. 18.

[3]Ibid., p. 1.

[4]Torsten Husen, "Are Standards in U.S. Schools Really Lagging Behind Those in Other Countries?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 64 (March 1983), p. 458.

[5]Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development: Theory Into Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 445.

[6]Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, *Action for Excellence* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1983), p. 13.

[7]John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 373.

[8]National Science Board, *Educating Americans for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation, 1983), p. v.

[9]Ibid., p. 65.

[10]Ibid., p. 5.

[11]Dewey, *Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 109–110.

[12]Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1982).

[13]Ernest L. Boyer, *High School* (New York: Harper, 1983), p. xiii.

[14]John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).

[15]Wilford M. Aikin, *The Story of the Eight-Year Study* (New York: Harper, 1942); *General Education*, Fifty-first Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, ed. Nelson B. Henry (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952); Hollis L. Caswell, ed., *The American High School: Its Responsibilities and Opportunity*, Eighth Yearbook of the John Dewey Society (New York: Harper, 1946), pp. 136, 157.

[16]Goodlad, op. cit., p. 346.

[17]Fund for the Advancement of Education, *They Went to College Early* (New York: The Fund, 1957).

[18]Daniel Tanner, "An Education Speed-up Appropriate for Some," *The New York Times* (February 12, 1983), p. 22.

[19]Henry Steele Commager, "Our Schools Have Kept Us Free," *Life* 29 (October 16, 1950): 46–47.

[20]Henry Steele Commager, *The Commonwealth of Learning* (New York: Harper, 1968), p. 107.

[21]John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," in *John Dewey on Education*, ed. R. D. Archambault (New York: Modern Library, 1964), p. 437.

[22]B. Frank Brown, Ch., National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, *The Reform of Secondary Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973); John H. Martin, Ch., National Panel on High School and Adolescent Education, *The Education of Adolescents* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Education, 1976).

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